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DEC.

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



CASE OF THE
VANISHING BLONDE
by CRAIG RICE &
MARK HOLT

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FLORA
HOLT



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Included

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OPIUM SMUGGLERS MEET THEIR MATCH

WHEN...

THE "JUNKS" IN THE
SPARE ALL RIGHT.
WHAT NOW? OP
PASS 'EM THROUGH.
I'LL FOLLOW
THEM HOME

HOMeward bound after a day at
TIJUANA, SENATOR BLAIK AND HIS
DAUGHTER STOP AT THE BORDER
FOR ROUTINE CUSTOM INSPECTION...

OPIUM? IN MY CAR?
YOU'RE BEING
PREPOSTEROUS!
I'M SENATOR
BLAIK!

USED BY OPIUM
SMUGGLERS, SENATOR.
LET ME SHOW YOU

AMAZING! YOU
SAY THEY PUT IT
IN THE TIRE AT
THAT PARKING
LOT?

EXACTLY! AND
TONIGHT THE GANG AT
THIS END WILL TRY TO
NAB IT. MAY I USE
YOUR 'PHONE?

THAT'S THAT. WELL
YOU FOLKS HAVE
YOUR DINNER. I'LL
BE BACK ABOUT
NIGHTFALL

WHY NOT
STAY AND
HAVE A
SNACK
WITH US?

SURE. COME
UPSTAIRS
AND
FRESHEN
UP

MIND IF I
SHAVE, SIR?
I'VE BEEN ON
DUTY SINCE
DAWN

CERTAINLY.
HERE'S A
Razor

THIS BLADE
SURE MAKES
SHORT WORK OF
WHISKERS. MY
FACE FEELS
GREAT

I'M SOLD ON
THIN GILLETTEs.
THEY'RE PLENTY
KEEN AND LONG-
LASTING

PUT UP YOUR HANDS
AND NO FUNNY
BUSINESS!

THE
FEDS!

SO THIS TIME
TOMORROW I'LL
BE HEADING EAST
ON THE SUPER-
CHIEF

THAT'S WONDERFUL!
WE'LL BE ON THE
SAME TRAIN!

HE'S
HANDSOME

WHEN YOU'RE OUT TO GET QUICK, EASY
SHAVES AT A SAVING, THIN GILLETTEs
ARE JUST YOUR DISH. YOU CAN'T FIND ANOTHER
LOW-PRICE BLADE SO KEEN AND LONG-LASTING.
THIN GILLETTEs ARE MADE FOR YOUR GILLETTE
RAZOR... FIT EXACTLY AND PROTECT YOUR FACE
FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN
GILLETTEs IN THE CONVENIENT
10-BLADE PACKAGE

LATE THAT NIGHT



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4-10¢

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DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

25¢

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Vol. 68

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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., at 1125 E. Vaille Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President. John J. McVarish, Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Indiana. Copyright, 1952, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.50, other countries, 50c additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1125 E. Vaille Ave., Kokomo, Indiana, or 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.

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letters from
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State _____

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Position _____

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READY for the RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

This column has just two reasons for being—to expose every nasty racket that makes honest men poorer, and to give people who have been tricked the satisfaction of warning others and recouping at least part of their losses.

If you've met up with a swindler, share your experience by writing to: The Rackets Editor, c/o DIME DETECTIVE, 205 E. 42nd St., N.Y.C. 17. We pay \$5 for each letter used and withhold your name if you request. Unfortunately, we can't enter into correspondence regarding any letter, nor return letters unless a stamped, self-addressed envelope is enclosed.

Now here's the latest in swindles:

Ring Around the Rosy

Dear Sir:

Here's a racket that has been used quite often on filling station owners in Mississippi.

It's always worked in the town or city that has a football game going on.

A well-dressed man driving one of the higher priced cars drives in a station of his choice, drinks a coke, buys a pack of cigarettes, then drives off. Later, usually about thirty to forty minutes, he comes back and announces that he has lost a ring. Not one of great value in money, but it has great sentimental value. He tells them he is going to the ball game, and if anyone should find the ring, he'll gladly give the finder \$100 for its return.

About an hour later another man arrives at the station, buys gas, picks up a ring and asks if someone lost a ring. They tell him about the other man offering \$100 for it, and tell him if he'll take it to the game he'll get the money. The finder says he'd never be able to locate the owner in the crowd. Then he laughs and says he'll sell the ring for \$75. In the case I learned of, this worked fine. The station owner said he'd give him \$50 for it and the man accepted quite willingly. The station owner never again saw either of the men or his \$50.

Scott Smith
Columbus, Miss.

No Gold in Them Thar Hills!

Dear Sir:

You would think that in the face of the rackets uncovered in your magazine and others, we would not be so susceptible. This one that caught us was a strange new one.

My family got mixed up in this one several months ago. We only lost a hundred dollars, but a hundred dollars is a hundred dollars.

There is an agency in this part of Alabama and the adjacent part of Mississippi which offers to bestow on all descendants of the Choctaw Indians their share in a gold mine in Texas, which was taken over by our government. The one hundred dollars we paid was to defray expenses involved. It was to be returned with interest when our checks began coming.

We are direct descendants of the Choctaws, and though I did not believe there was anything to it, I did not want to be left out if any money was to be handed out.

That was four months ago. We have heard nothing more. We are supposed to be level-headed folks but this makes me doubtful. I can just imagine a lot of other families being caught in this racket. To me it seemed like a dream come true—but it never did.

Mary A. James
Prichard, Ala.

On the Hook

Dear Sir:

Being an avid fisherman, I was quick to respond to an ad by a company in one of our local papers that offered a set of what I considered to be very extraordinary fishing rods. For while I've used both fly and casting rods in my time, I never had seen any that could be used as either one or both. These rods also had a few other uses and were made so that they could be folded to resemble a walking cane.

When their salesman replied to my ad, I, despite that fact that I've been a salesman for over 20 years, was thoroughly taken in by his sales talk, especially as he told me that they had never been offered to any of the sporting goods stores in this city. He, believe it or not, talked me out of \$10 for a set of samples. When I set out to sell them, I found that he had been quite untrue in his statement, for the first ten men I spoke to told me that the same things had been offered to them by several men before me, and two of them told me they'd bought them and been stuck with them. And so was I, for despite the fact

(Continued on page 8)

AMAZING NEW TRAINING PLAN

I PREPARE YOU AT HOME FOR BIG PAY JOBS IN TELEVISION RADIO ELECTRONICS WITHIN MONTHS!

Leonard C. Lane,
B.S., M.A.
President of Radio-Television
Training Association,
Exec. Dir. of Pierce School
of Radio and Television

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My Advanced Training Prepares You For Better Jobs
Then, after you finish your training for a position as a full-fledged TV Technician—where you can write your own ticket and choose from dozens of fascinating careers—I don't stop there! I continue to train you—**AT NO EXTRA COST**—to qualify for even better pay in the BETTER JOBS that demand FCC licenses, with my ...

FCC COACHING COURSE

PREPARES YOU AT HOME FOR YOUR FCC LICENSE
THE BEST JOBS IN TV AND RADIO REQUIRE AN FCC LICENSE

Given to every student at NO EXTRA COST after TV Theory and Practice is completed.

Earn Extra Money In Spare Time

Make as much as \$25.00 a week in your spare time while learning—repairing Radio-TV sets. Many of my students pay for their entire training from spare time earnings almost from the very beginning... start their own service business.

FREE EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE. My vocational adviser will show you how you can have a good-paying career in the locality of your choice.

I GET MY GRADUATES GOOD PAYING JOBS

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 "I now hold a fine airline position at LaGuardia Field, New York City, thanks to your excellent training." — Joseph Rozenberg

 "Your excellent instruction helped me get my present job as an airport radio mechanic for American Airlines." — Eugene E. Basch

Many others working at NEC, RCA, CBS, Gugent, Philco, Emerson, Admiral and other leading firms.

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WITH THE 15 BIG TELEVISION-RADIO
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AND KEEP
ALL THESE
UNITS**



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VETERANS!

MAIL COUPON
TODAY
MY SIMPLE
METHODS
MAKE SUCCESS
EASY!

RITA

IF ELIGIBLE UNDER NEW
G. I. BILL (discharged
after June 27, 1950)—
CHECK COUPON BELOW!



BOTH
New
Illustrated
Book plus
Sample
Lesson

NO SALESMAN WILL CALL!

Mr. Leonard C. Lane, President
RADIO-TELEVISION TRAINING ASSN.
1629 Broadway, Radio City Station
New York 19, N.Y.

Dept. Z-10

Dear Mr. Lane:

Mail me your **NEW FREE BOOK** and **SAMPLE LESSON** that will show me how I can make **BIG MONEY** in **TELEVISION**. I understand I am under no obligation and no salesman will call.

Name _____ Age _____

Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____

I am interested in: Radio-TV Advanced FM-TV
VETERANS: If qualified under new G.I. Bill, check here

(Continued from page 6)

that I wrote the company at least ten times, they did not even have the courtesy to reply.

L. E. Carol
New Orleans, La.

Milking Scheme

Dear Sir:

Even though you order from a reputable dairy, the morning milk delivery, I have learned to my sorrow, can be a racket in two ways. In addition to the annoying rattle of bottles early in the morning, a housewife can be duped by a dishonest milkman.

In our town, milkmen buy their products and retail them to their customers, but the monthly bill is mailed out by the company. Our first bill was in a lump sum. I sent out a check that month but requested itemized statements thereafter. The next month the amount was "lumped" again. I withheld payment until the itemized account was presented. The amount seemed high, so I began marking the number of bottles delivered on my daily calendar.

The first month a couple of extra quarts had been added, but the milkman said a substitute must have made the mistake, and allowed me credit for the overcharge. It happened a second time. It was blamed on a new girl in the office.

After this, everything checked for several months and I neglected to keep strict account. Suddenly, a pound of butter which I definitely had not ordered appeared on my bill. That was, adjusted in the same way as the extra quarts of milk—without question.

At that time I decided to buy ticket books and put out only enough to cover individual orders. This, I thought, was fool proof. The second book I bought had five 10c tickets torn from the back. When I confronted the milkman with this, he accused me of being dishonest, of tearing them out myself and blaming him.

There was nothing I could do. If I had reported him to the company, it would have been my word against his, and nothing could have been proven.

We changed dairies of course, and our new milkman is honest.

Mrs. O. Y. Palmer
Lincoln, Nebraska

The Landlady Took a Powder

Dear Sir:

My neighbors answered an advertisement for a five-room apartment and paid the woman who showed them the apartment \$60.00 in advance under the impression that she was the landlady.

However, when they attempted to move into the apartment, the agent for the building stopped them, saying he knew nothing of such an agreement.

The agent said the woman they had given \$60.00 to had picked up the keys to the property as a prospective buyer.

M. C.
Chicago, Ill.

Swindling Buddy

Dear Sir:

More often than not, human sorrow and grief seem to afford the springboard for swindlers to go into business.

A good example of this came recently in a mid-western state. An enterprising young man conceived a new angle for preying on survivors of men killed in battle.

His swindle went something like this. He would scan the daily newspapers for casualty lists from the Korean war zone. Finding the lists of "killed in action," he would write a letter to the nearest of kin. His correspondence was to the effect that the dead soldier had been a "buddy" of his and before going overseas had borrowed a sum of money (the amounts ranged from \$10 to \$50).

The swindler would point out that he now needed the money that he had loaned. He further urged that the dead serviceman would surely want his kin to square the debt.

Fortunately, his enterprise was nipped in the bud before he got started good. The FBI arrested him immediately after his first batch of letters went out.

Ramon Greenwood
Little Rock, Ark.

Investment Blues

Dear Sir:

Money did not come to us easily—I mean to my husband and myself. So when we had managed to build up a savings account of some six-hundred dollars, we were greatly elated. The next step was to invest the money so that we would be adding to the principal all the time.

A friend, whom we will call Mr. Robinson, happened in one day. He was selling stock in a utility firm and his plan of investment sounded like the very thing for our savings. Taking his word without question, we put our money (all of it) into the utility stock he was selling and in which he had placed some six thousand dollars of his own money.

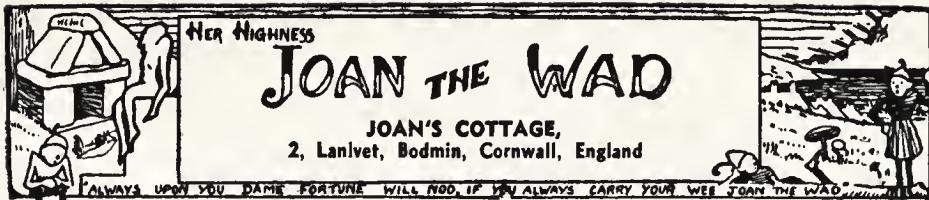
At the end of three months, we rejoiced when we received our first dividend check. Another three months and a second check made its appearance. Then a third check arrived.

But suddenly the checks stopped coming. Inquiry revealed that we had been taken in by a cheap swindle. A slick promoter had taken advantage of our gullibility—he paid his dividends out of the money collected from his clients, and then skipped the country. We had no recourse.

What did we learn from this costly experience? Never again to invest without first investigating—even if a well-meaning friend recommends the plan. First consult the Better Business Bureau.

Lois Pruitt Meeker
Amarillo, Texas

That's the pitch on the rackets for now. See you again next issue.



AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . who won \$5,600 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his \$5,600 he gave me \$280 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

HURRY

Mrs. WILSON, of Falmouth, says, 1951:
Since receiving Joan the Wad . . . my husband's health has improved 100%.

Mr. Jones of Cheltenham, says, 1951:
Send me J. O'Lantern. Since receiving Joan the Wad have won two 1st prizes in Crosswords . . . John Bull and Sunday Chronicle.

SEND NOW

JOAN THE WAD

is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that she has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.

Just send Two Dollar notes or an International Money Order and a large self-addressed envelope to:

JOAN'S COTTAGE, 2, LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL, ENG.

and I will send you both History and Mascot.

AS SPECULATOR. A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 14 cent shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to \$1.10. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."



THRILL DOCKET

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



Pat Riordan was almost to Palm Springs when his spot caught a pretty redhead running in panic. Another car had just sideswiped hers—or rather the car of her boss, movie star Myra Denton—and Joyce thought it was deliberate. . . .

The last person Pat wanted to see was Myra—his old flame of years back. Myra wasn't exactly glad to see him either—or else her bad mood was a holdover from a quarrel with her current Romeo, director Carter LeBlanc.



The next morning, Pat heard the news: Carter LeBlanc was dead, lying by Myra's pool with his head bashed in. . . . To Pat, Myra was the obvious answer—but the cops had a warrant out for red-headed Joyce Kendall instead. . . .

But Myra was scared too—that the publicity would smash her career. Desperately, she begged for Pat's help. . . . For the rest of Dean Owen's fast-paced novelette, see "Death Rides This Road!" in the February issue, published December 3rd.

ALLURE...

with a
"PERSONAL" TOUCH

EXCITING PANTIES and NIGHTIE With Motto and Initials

There's "Sheer" magic in the breathtaking loveliness of the chantilly style black lace panties. Fetching and fascinating, you "wear your heart on your hip" with a daring, darling motto and personalized initials. The glorious nightie is an inspiring creation that beautifully combines clinging fine quality chiffon with delicate peek-a-boo black lace. The accent is on lovely, lovely you in these glamorous "personally yours" garments. Irresistible gifts that make you irresistible.

Nightie Colors:

Black
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Orchid Apricot
Pink Blue

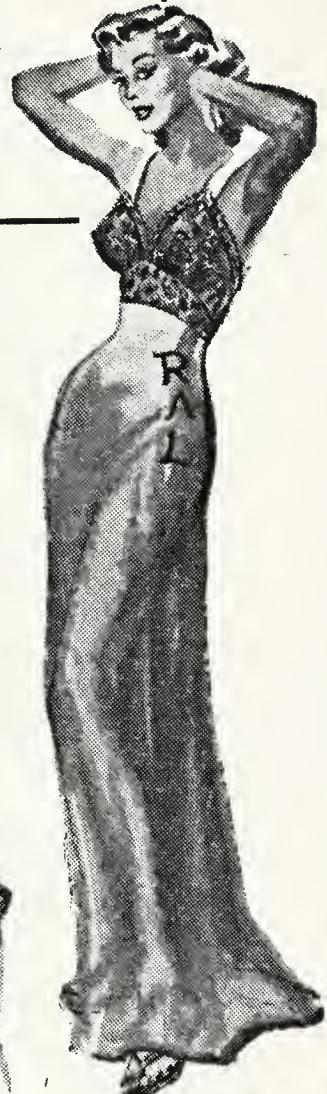
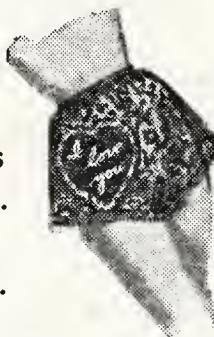
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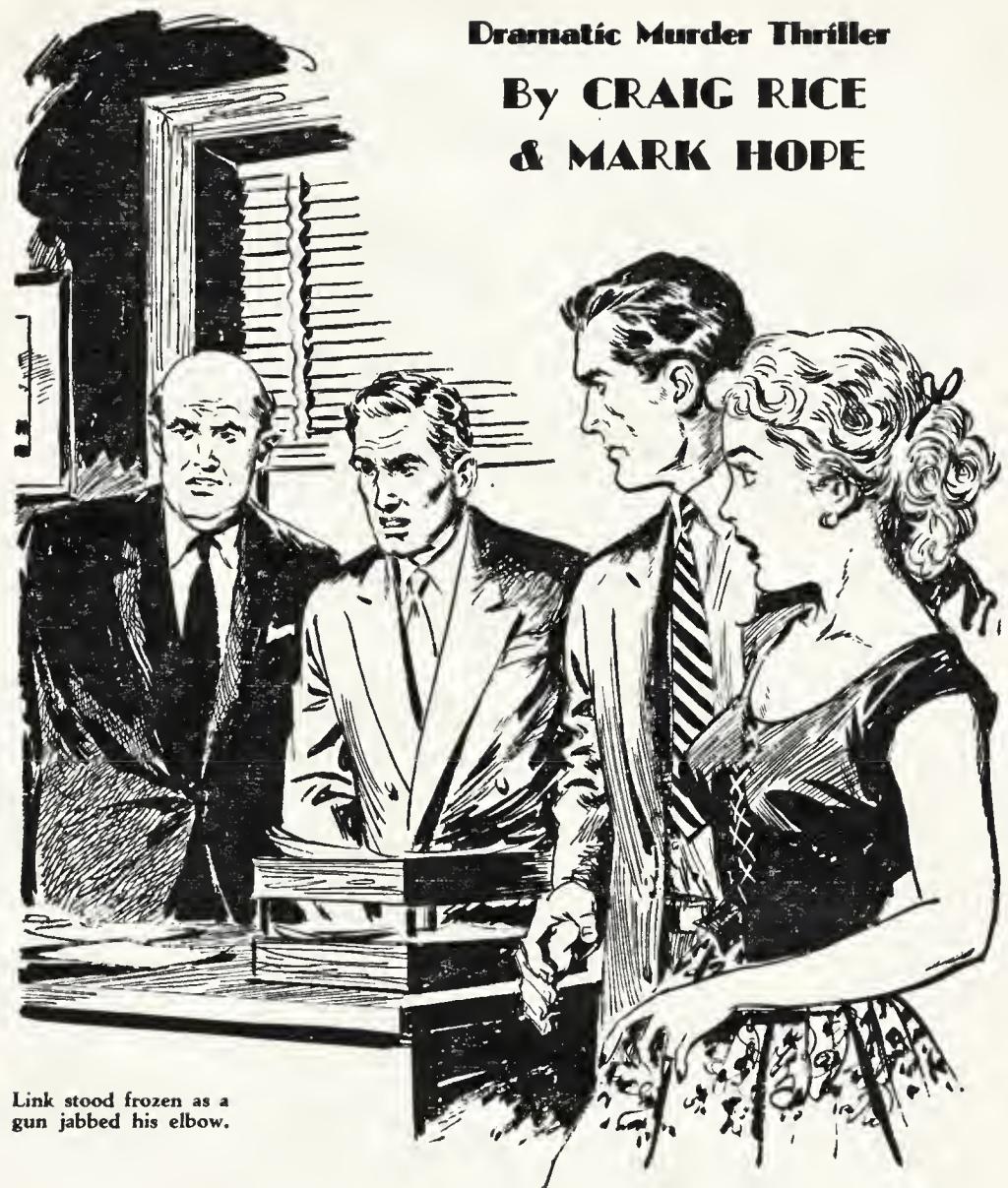
CASE OF THE VANISHING BLONDE



*First the blonde of his dreams had vanished, then a hoodlum's
corpse. . . . And something told Brad he'd better find them both,
fast—or the next thing he'd lose would be his life!*

Dramatic Murder Thriller

By CRAIG RICE
& MARK HOPE



Link stood frozen as a gun jabbed his elbow.

HER name, Ed Bradbury thought, will be Carol. She will have hair somewhere between ash blonde and reddish gold. She'll have a strictly front row body, with yards and yards of legs. She'll know the difference between receipt and recipe, and she'll look wonderful waiting at the gate when I come home;

at the end of a hectic day all in from—

From what? From police work. She'll be the type who likes and respects cops, with a special fondness for lieutenant detectives. She'll glow with quiet pride when I bring home the badge I have won for hard work, with that touch of brilliance my superiors cannot deny.

Behind Brad in the Pullman car, a sailor remarked to his buddy, "Do you really sail for dimpled knees? What a character!"

Brad smiled, settled back against the chair back and slipped back into his dream. He closed his eyes and thought about the girl he had dreamed up in the long ago. And now that he was on vacation from the Bridgeport Police School, maybe . . . You could never tell in New York.

Carol (the future Mrs. Bradbury) would be waiting on the porch of a mansion. No need to ring the bell. She had been waiting, frantic. Terror added a heart-breaking loveliness to her beautiful face. Brad plunged in through the door, to save her from the maddened killer. The room was empty. Nothing but a broken wineglass on the floor. Shards. Then a tailor's dummy came out from behind a tapestry and bawled:

"Grand Central Terminal! Grand Central Terminal!"

Brad woke with a start, rubbed the kink from his neck, and groggily trailed the departing throng. Now, to find a hotel and sleep for twenty-four hours! Then he could spend the rest of his vacation having fun wherever he found it.

He passed through the gate into the waiting room, and there she was.

She was standing only a few feet away, packed into the crowd. His first thought was, *Funny, I thought her eyes were blue.*

They were green, and wide with fright. They flickered here and there as though seeking courage, refuge, help. Brad's eyes followed in their direction and saw two men grimly closing in on the girl.

Louie the Lug, he thought, and the Creeper. Or somebody quite as sinister. He tucked his magazine under the hand carrying his bag and, with his right arm free, started toward the girl. He was acting instinctively. Here was the form and color of his dream, fright and all. Here was the girl.

She detached herself suddenly from the crowd and flung herself at him, joy and terror mingled on her face. He caught a quick glimpse of tapering, shining legs, a body expensively molded in plaid wool, and then she was in his arms.

"*Herbert!*" she cried. "I thought you'd never get here, darling!"

She danced up and down a little. She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "I'm so glad to see you, I could eat you!" she bubbled. Under her breath she murmured, "Please. Give a little."

Brad relaxed in a kind of happy abandon, his face falling into an imbecile grin. He dropped his bag, for purposes of further cooperation. Over her shoulder he saw Louie the Lug and the Creeper in a double knot of frustration, indecision, and rage. He stiffened, and the girl pulled her mouth away.

"Come on," she whispered into his ear. "Take me to a taxi. Be gay."

He grabbed her arm affectionately. A guy and his girl, headed for happiness, pushed through the crowd and ran for a taxi. Smiles followed them. Envious glances. Then two strangers rode away, toward the address she had given the driver.

"Don't ask any questions," was her first remark.

He looked at her, puzzled. "My name isn't *Herbert*."

She said nothing. She fixed her eyes on the back of the driver's head.

"And what's more, you didn't think it was," he accused.

She said nothing, somewhat more pointedly.

"Now look here," Brad said, "if you think I'm going to leave it at this, you're crazy. I get off a train intending to mind my own business, and the next thing I know, I've got a beautiful girl draped around my neck, calling me *Herbert*. You *are* beautiful," he said, and the memory of his dream softened his voice. "You're very beautiful, and I've thought about you.

I've thought about you more than I have time to tell. Only . . ."

It was like talking to a juke box which has just come up with the wrong record. Her haughty silence went on and on.

"I've got a right to know," he said. "You pick me out of a crowd, get me into a taxi I didn't want, and then say, 'Don't ask questions.' Your attitude is a reflection on my intelligence. And yours. Why me? Why pick me?"

She looked at him then and in spite of his anger, he caught his breath. It was that kind of a face. It was magic.

"I picked you because you were the nearest thing available," she said calmly. "And never mind why. I don't know why myself. I came to New York to see my grandfather's circus open, and the first thing I know a couple of lugs are trying to shanghai me someplace. Now don't ask me why. That's another thing I don't know. Except that it was happening. And now—now I wish you'd just go away and forget the whole thing."

BRAD fell back into the corner of his seat. "Just my luck," he said bitterly. "I'll wake up in a minute and get off the train. And there won't be any you. There won't be any Louie the Lug, or whatever. Well, go on, get out of my dream. The longer you stay, the tougher it will be to wake up."

She frowned. "Are you by any chance crazy?"

"I'm asleep," Brad said. "It's natural. I've been out on my feet a couple of days. Working. When I sleep, I dream, and when I dream, I dream of you. Song title. Well, I may as well enjoy it. I never told you about you, did I?"

"No."

"Can you remember the other dreams? Remember how we met when I was sixteen? I didn't kiss you then. I just looked. It was about six dreams later, still sixteen, that I kissed you. It woke me up. So I

stopped kissing you until now on the train. Asleep. I must be very tired, to sleep through this. But it seems so real. That's why I want you to go. Somebody'll stick an elbow in my face in a minute, and I'll wake up before you're gone. It'll be easier if you go first. You can jump out, or just vanish. It's only a dream."

She smiled. "Then how do you account for the lipstick on your face?"

"That's part of the dream. I can't see it. Give me your mirror."

The little rectangle of glass showed him his own face, not distorted, not changing into the face of a stranger, as sometimes happens in a dream. On his cheek were two smudges of lipstick. He scrubbed with his handkerchief, and returned the mirror.

"Oh well," he said, "everything will dissolve and change before I wake up. It always does."

She looked at him thoughtfully for about two blocks of riding time. "Why," she said at last, "you mean it, don't you!"

"Mean it! Take a look. This face is the face of truth."

"Not that profile," she said. "That's soft lights and—nuts. Do you really think you're dreaming?"

"What else?" he asked. "Would you be here? And those tall buildings. There aren't any buildings that tall. They're topless."

He looked at her intently, the green of her eyes, the red gold of her hair, the complex curves of her cheeks, the pointed chin. "This is Ilium," he said softly.

Her eyes widened with bewilderment, and something else. The fright was gone now, and the terror. Her lips were parted, her eyes were bright, as though remembering. She frowned, yes, but she listened.

"The face that launched a thousand ships," he murmured, "and burned the topless towers of Ilium."

The cab swerved around a corner, throwing her against him. For a moment her fingers tightened on his arm.

"I went to school too," she said lightly, moving away from him. "I had to memorize the same corn." She leaned forward and spoke to the driver. "The third house on the left."

The cab slowed to a stop before an old and lovely brownstone. She shoved open the door, paused, and kissed him again. This time she meant it.

"I'll get out of your dream," she whispered, "if you'll get out of mine."

He lifted his arms toward her, but she was gone. She flung money at the driver, flung words over her shoulder.

"Thanks for getting me out of a tight spot."

She ran up the steps and into the house, her heels beating a swift, farewell tattoo against the echoing stone.

THE driver turned and looked at him.

Brad said, "What's a hackie doing in Ilium?"

The driver said, "Where to, bud?"

"Wait a second." Brad had a growing conviction that he'd been a little too quick on the draw. This cookie required somewhat more baking. He fished out his handkerchief and wiped his lips. "What do you see?"

The driver grinned. "Kids and hollyhocks and butchers' bills. Nice babe."

"I'm a stupe," Brad said. "Good-by chum."

He got out. The taxi drove away. Brad went up to the door and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a butler with a face of chilled steel. "Yes?" he said.

Brad gestured with the magazine he had been holding. "She left this in the cab. Would you ask her to come down, please?"

"She?" the butler said. "Evidently you have the wrong residence, sir."

"The young lady who just went in," Brad said impatiently. A pulse throbbed painfully in his forehead. "The lady with me in the cab."

"Young lady? Why, no one has entered

this house for upward of fifteen minutes, sir."

Brad backed away a half step and looked at the man. He felt his jaw slacken for a moment. This was the dream again. He shook himself. No, he hadn't been dreaming.

"I brought her here in a taxi," he said. "We stopped there at the curb. She came in here. But she left this, and I want to give it back to her."

The butler started to close the door. "I'm afraid you're mistaken, sir. I don't in the least know what you're talking about."

Brad stuck his foot in the door. "Hold it. I want to see her. Something's screwy in there."

The butler reluctantly opened the door once more. His voice was soft and low. "Beat it, Mac, before I tear your arm off and beat you over the head with it."

Brad pulled his head back turtle-wise and measured the opposition chin. Rolling on his feet, he feinted a one-two and uppercut the man precisely on the button.

The butler's hard eyes glazed with surprise, and he sagged, all the starch going out of his knees as he toppled toward Brad. Brad let him fall, and stepped over large, upturned feet into the house.

A room opened off the first hall, a gracious and comfortable room. Brad's first impression was that it had a spacious and old-fashioned gloom. It was so large that he noticed characteristic details of the room itself before he noticed the occupant.

He saw the wall brackets which had once been gas fixtures and which now held twisted, candle-like bulbs; he saw the accumulation of pictures—one was obviously Uncle Quincy, or Grandfather, or some other bristle-bearded ancestor; another was a print of a stag at bay, hung beside a winter scene; and on one wall was a long, Chinese scroll.

Tall windows gave out onto a tiny formal garden; in the great fireplace a tiny

blaze glowed, reflected again and again from the old, dark paneling. Beside the fireplace was a huge, ugly lamp with a beaded glass shade, and the ancient chair beneath it seemed to have grown to fit the old man who sat there.

He looked up at Brad, his thin face calm. His eyes flashed, but his pointed beard did not become rigid, nor did his transparent hands, folded on the rug over his lap, show any tension. When he spoke, it was softly and courteously, with a faint touch of the Old Cape South in his voice.

"To what, sir, do I owe the unexpected pleasure of your presence here? Pardon my not rising, but I'm poorly."

"Where is she?" Brad demanded.

"She?" the old man echoed. "She, sir?"

"The girl who came in here. Where is she?"

"You must be mistaken, sir. No girl came in here."

"Look," Brad said. "I don't know what the game is. I just had a slight argument with your butler on that point. A girl did come in here. I want to know where she is now."

The pointed beard did become rigid, as the old man drew himself up with magnificent dignity.

"I must ask you, young man, to leave my house."

"The hell I will." Brad put down his bag. "Listen, uncle. I'm going to have a look around, and—"

A pistol shot cut off his threat. It was a familiar sound to Brad, but he jumped nevertheless. It was like finding a maddened roebuck in the heart of Times Square. You didn't expect pistol shots here at Mint Julep Manor.

He checked his immediate impulse to run toward the sound of the shot. Was he really awake? This was like his dream. He swung another quick glance around the room, but nothing had changed, everything was as solid and respectable as ever. He looked at the picture of Uncle Quincy, but

the image didn't wink, as it would have in a dream. He dashed out to find a stairway. The shot had come from above.

There were light switches in the house, and lights. But that was all. Not a carpet, not a stick of furniture. Dust lay on the floors of the bare rooms. Bewildered, Brad went from room to room. The parlor, or whatever the room was downstairs, was furnished to perfection. But elsewhere there was nothing. Nothing but dust.

In the third room upstairs he found something else. Louie the Lug lay on the floor, green suit, Homburg hat and all. And Louie the Lug was dead.

ONE quick glance verified that. Nobody lives who has been shot between the eyes with a large caliber gun. Brad's eyes swept the room, found nothing significant. He ran into the next room, a large one that ran across the front of the house.

It too was empty. Not so much as a discarded phone book. And dust on the floor, dust everywhere.

Through a window he could see a big dark blue car parked at the curb, a uniformed chauffeur lounging against the door. As Brad watched, the chauffeur threw away his cigarette and stiffened to attention.

A man was moving down the short walk, leisurely, without concern, as though murder hadn't been done upstairs only a moment ago. He was a big man, almost incredibly fat, and yet not flabby. Solid, rather, both in physical presence and in poise. He wore black and was hatless. A fringe of faded red hair decorated the back of his pale, shining bald head.

The chauffeur opened the door, the fat man got in, the car drove away. Brad drew a quick breath. From somewhere down below, a door closed quietly.

Brad wheeled and took the stairway in three leaps. He burst into the parlor.

Nobody was there. The "poorly" old man had made a quick recovery. A look

into the hall showed no butler sprawled in the doorway. He'd made a quick recovery too, Brad reflected. Lots of bounce to these people.

Brad became wary now. He went softly back to the stairway and listened. A murderer had been here, perhaps was still here. In a house like this, you could hear things. He put one ear against the wall and held his breath for a space of thirty seconds.

Nothing moved. From outside came muffled traffic noise, and the strains of a hand organ in *Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair*. But no boards creaked inside. There was only aching, breathing silence.

Where was the telephone? Before he did anything else, he must call the police. Then if he were drawn away, they'd have part of the picture at least.

He went through the house, room by empty room. There was no telephone. There would be one at the nearest drug-store. But should he leave the scene?

There was the girl to consider, too.

He had come here to find her, and he was damned if he'd leave until he knew more. He could hail a passerby outside, have him call the police, and then really go through the place. He went to the front door and was standing on the steps watching for the first pedestrian when he heard footsteps behind him.

Brad shrank to one side of the doorway. The steps were light and quick, not running, but moving in haste.

The first thing in sight was a gun. The man behind it was the ultra-dignified butler, his suet-bland face hinting at a smile now. "Are you still among us?" he asked.

"Put that gun down and we'll discuss that."

With his left hand the butler threw a fringed muffler around his neck. In that instant Brad thought of jumping him, but the man's gesture was so easy, the gun in such perfect command, that the action would only have been suicide.

From faraway a phone did begin to ring. It called through the house like a cheerful voice from another and friendlier world. The butler continued tucking in his scarf fastidiously.

"It so happens that I have just given my notice," he informed Brad. "Perhaps you would care to answer the telephone."

With the gun lined on Brad's middle, he backed out the door. He fumbled behind him, swung it open a few inches, cased the street carefully, saw what he wanted, remarked, "Many happy returns," and was gone.

The phone continued, one tolling summons after another. From the nearest window, Brad observed the butler step into a waiting taxi. The driver threw the flag down, and they rolled away around the corner.

Brad shook himself back to here and now. These were livelier doings than he had ever known in Bridgeport. Somewhere in the house the phone still called out. He walked through four vacant, deserted rooms before he located its urgent appeal hidden in a closet beneath the storeroom steps.

"Hello," he said, and waited.

The voice which answered held the same gentle dignity, the same inflection of the Old South, and something else. A sense of humor on the edge of the horrible.

"Young man, I regret to tell you this, but—"

"Yes?"

"Get out of this, lad. Don't be a bother. Go on back to wherever you came from and forget the whole thing. You'd be much happier."

"Why?"

"You take my advice now, and your girl will come back to you in one piece." The voice chuckled disagreeably. "Otherwise—piecemeal."

In the sudden silence Brad heard a double click as the line went dead.

CHAPTER TWO

Return of the Blonde

WALKING back to the front door, Brad looked thoughtful. Upstairs lay a body, fresh-killed. Downstairs there had been Act I, Scene 2 of Massa Down on the Old Plantation. A pretty girl—no, he corrected himself, a radiant girl—popped out like a figure in a cuckoo clock, then vanished along with all the other actors. Maybe the whole experience was a new and malignant form of train sickness.

But he knew that one way or another, he was going to see *her* again.

Brad crossed the street then to a chain drugstore on the corner. He phoned the police from a booth, was put through to the Homicide Division, and related to an Inspector Calkins the bare facts regarding the murdered man he'd found. He promised to meet the inspector at the old brownstone in fifteen minutes. . . .

Fifteen minutes later the two men entered the room where Brad had seen the corpse. The body was gone. The overlay of dust was gone, where parties unknown had removed the late gangster, but otherwise the room was as bare as the palm of your hand.

Inspector Calkins looked at Brad for a long time. "What an imagination!" he commented gently.

"I know what I saw," Brad said stoutly. "The lights are on, aren't they? And there's a spot on the floor. Here. It's blood."

"How did you happen to be here?" Calkins asked. There was something that seemed to be kindly interest in his voice.

"A girl met me at the train," Brad said. "She brought me here."

"Sweetheart?"

"No-o-o," Brad admitted. "I never saw her before."

"I see," the inspector commented. "So

she brought you home to meet the family."

"Not exactly," Brad said. "I had to knock out the butler to get in. You see—" He trailed off, trying to grin. "It doesn't make sense."

"It's fascinating," the inspector said. "Simply fascinating. I've dreamed about things like this and woke up in a cold sweat. Give me the tag, now. After you rushed up here and found a stiff, what happened?"

Brad told him, briefly. He finished, "Then the butler left."

The inspector gave him a look which had caused hardened gorillas to cross the street. He took off his hard hat. He fanned himself with it. "Where did you say you got your police training?"

"Bridgeport."

"Oh," the inspector said, as if that explained everything. He looked sadly at Brad. He shook his head.

Brad said hastily, "Wait a minute. Let me try it from another angle. Never mind the background. I saw a man dead here. Shot between the eyes. He was about five foot eight, weighed about one hundred and sixty. He had a melon-shaped scar on his chin. He wore a green gabardine suit with a brown pin-stripe, and a gray Homburg. His shirt was pink, his tie brown."

The inspector looked mildly interested. "Could be Charley the Matzoh. Go on."

Now I'm getting somewhere, Brad thought. "So I started putting two and two together."

"And woke up juggling."

"All right. You don't have to believe me. That's your privilege. Before this is finished, though, I'll make you cook soup in that hat. I come to you with a straight, solid story—"

"Solid!" The inspector snorted. "Let me tell *you* something. In practically every murder now, they use a corpse." His tone became almost fatherly. "Look, Bradbury, you're a nice lad. But go away. That's not much to ask. Just take yourself quietly away."

Whereupon the inspector grabbed Brad's arm, led him gently downstairs, flipped off the lights and opened the front door.

"This is an elegant department," Brad said. "First a guy is bumped, then a girl is snatched, but it's nothing in your life. Back in Bridgeport—"

"Bridgeport be blamed!" roared the inspector. "If this is police work in Bridgeport, high time the town was under martial law."

He shook off Brad's restraining hand, hotfooted it across the sidewalk to the police car. "Drive like hell," said the inspector.

BRAD stood on the sidewalk, gazing after the receding tail-lights. No wonder things didn't make sense, he told himself, realizing how fuzzy he was from lack of sleep. What he wanted most of all was a bed, a big one, with thick white pillows, in a room where the curtains wouldn't let in any daylight until he chose to wake up. He stumbled away, resolved to check in at the first hotel he found. He thought of his bag. He'd left it somewhere. Perhaps in the phone booth.

A voice said, "Psst! Hey Galahad!"

He wheeled around. The girl stepped out of a shadow and gripped his arm with both hands, hard.

Brad stared at her. Her face was very white, and there was a smudge of dirt on one cheek. Her hair was disheveled, but her eyes were twinkling.

"I'm so glad you came back here!" she said. "I hoped, I thought, I was sure you would." Then, with sharp anxiety, "Weren't those policemen?"

"Yes."

"Oh," she said in despair.

"Don't worry," Brad said bitterly. "The inspector tagged me for nuts and bolts. He's probably right, and at this moment I don't care. There was no corpse. Some undertaker borrowed him for a window display or something. Why do we stand

here gabbing? What happened to you?"

"I think I was kidnapped. It felt that way. But the kidnapper locked bumpers with another car. I got away."

"Who was he?" Brad demanded.

"Darn! I knew there was something I forgot." She smiled one of those April shower smile. "You see, he never took his hat off."

Sudden anger was like ice water on Brad's weariness. He wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her. He said harshly, "You'd wisecrack at your own funeral. So far we've got a murder, a kidnapping, and God knows what else. Young woman, we are going to find a table, and you are going to put your cards on it. The whole hand."

She looked at him meekly and said in a small voice, "Could we have some food on that table, too? I could eat an old mop, if it had a dab of mustard."

Brad became aware that a car had idled to the curb behind them. "Need any help, lady?" a voice asked.

Brad whirled, fists clenched, then saw it was a cab. He took the girl's arm, yanked her across the sidewalk, and pushed her in. "Take us to a cafe," he said. "The nearest one."

The cab driver studied the situation for a minute. He looked at her, then at Brad. "You gonna ply her with drink, or food, brother?"

"Food," Brad said.

The cab driver scratched his head, then turned on his meter. Over its clicking, he said, "I guess it's okay then. But if you were gonna take her to a night club, I wouldn't drive you. I don't like women drinking in public. Do you?"

"I never thought about it," Brad said.

"You ought to, brother," the driver said. "You really ought to. Someday you'll have a girl of your own, maybe, and then you'll think about it."

"This is fine philosophy," Brad said, indicating the clicking meter, "but it's cost-

ing me dough. Drive on, pal, drive on."

The driver snapped up the flag and the clicking stopped. "Sorry, brother. This romance is on me, except for the two-bits already on the meter. Now don't get me wrong. I prefer the old-fashioned life. Women frail and men manly. See what I mean?"

The girl said, "I should think your attitude would cost you money."

"Lady," the driver said, "on the night shift, I starve. Daytimes is okay. They all want to go to Macy's. But I won't take 'em to a dive, so night times I don't work much."

Brad looked at the driver's identification card. "Mr. Silvius," he said, "that philosophy is out of this world. But in this one, we're hungry."

"You're in trouble, too," Salvador Silvius said. "I can see. It's funny how much trouble there is. Maybe sunspots is at the bottom of it, I dunno. If you can tell me what your trouble is, I can fix it."

"Some other time," Brad said, "if you don't mind."

"Don't mind at all, brother. Any time you need transport, call the company, ask for Number 76. I'll come."

"Shall we go now?" the girl said wistfully. "I crave calories."

Salvador Silvius flashed her an appreciative glance. "A neat alliteration, sister. I like the alliterative phrase. Here." He took a pamphlet from his pocket. "I wrote this. Tells you what I think. Printed it myself."

"Could we go?" the girl asked plaintively.

"Sure, sister," Silvius said. He started to put the flag down, halted. "Forgot. Free ride. Where to?"

"Anywhere you say," Brad said, "but I had something like a steak in mind."

Silvius shoved in his clutch and drove away. Presently he deposited them at Carl's Cafe. "If you don't like this," he said, "you're crazy. Oh, everybody to his

own taste, of course. Just two-bits, brother. Oh well, if you say so. Thanks for the tip. Remember, ring me."

BRAD followed the girl inside to a table.

She sat down across from him and said, "I'll certainly say this for our new friend. He took the tension out of you. Took the tension," she repeated. "Say, he's got me doing it."

He looked at her, at the green eyes, the red-gold hair, the complex curves of her cheeks. "It's just come to me," he said.

"Like in a dream?" she asked.

"Shut up," Brad said pleasantly. "It's just come to me that I don't know your name. Oh, I know your dream name, but not the one you wear when I'm awake."

"It's Jackie," she told him. "Jackie Dalton. And I don't know why you're in this."

"I've got a reason," Brad said.

She murmured, "A man is known by the reasons he keeps."

The waitress arrived with pad and pencil.

"Food," Brad said. "Anything. Lots of it. Quick And lots of coffee."

The waitress blinked and went away. Brad looked at Jackie again. He said, "You're something out of my favorite dream. But look, I've got to hurry. I'm on a short vacation. So I want to know what you know. I'll add what I know, and maybe we can make some sense out of this." He added, "I'm not only a very hungry guy, I'm a very tired guy. I want to sleep. Extensively. Right around the clock."

She smiled faintly. "You're nice." No trace of flippancy now. Her under lip tightened. "But—you see, I'm scared."

"I'm scared too," Brad said. "That's why we've got to do something about this." He waited a second, then went on, "I'm in this, and to stay."

The waitress brought two plates of lamb stew and two cups of coffee.

"Tell me," Jackie said, "what do you want to know?"

Brad waved his hand toward the food.
"After," he said.

They ate in silence, and he shot an occasional glance at her. Anyone looking at her would first have seen her as beautiful—but would have remembered her as frightened. Maybe he still was dreaming.

When they had finished, Jackie said "Those cards you mentioned. I'll deal 'em off the top when you're ready."

"Go right ahead."

"Well—" she said. "It's a little complicated. I'd been looking for Grandpa—" She broke off, smiled wanly, and said, "Maybe I'd better give you a little background. We're circus people. My father was an animal man. He died very prosaically of a ruptured appendix when I was a baby. My mother married again, another animal trainer named Frost. He had a little boy by a former marriage—Link. I don't remember Frost, but Link and Grandpa do. He was killed by one of the cats. People think mother was killed by a fall during a rehearsal, but Grandpa says it was a broken heart. She just didn't care. So Grandpa and Whit Sumner—he's been Grandpa's business manager since I can first remember—brought us up, Link and me. That—that sort of brings you up to date."

"Almost," Brad said. "Let's have more about this grandfather of yours. He interests me."

A look came into her eyes. Suddenly she was more beautiful than Brad had ever imagined her. "He's—" Her voice almost broke. "It's hard to explain about the Colonel. That's what most people call Grandpa. He was like a father and mother and grandfather, and uncles and aunts, and a bunch of school friends, and your favorite movie star, all rolled up into one bundle. He could do things nobody else could do. He could always understand when you wanted to explain something to him, or when you were asking for something you'd set your heart on, like a kinkajou, or your

first party dress, or a pair of skis. All the people in the circus loved him. He could be gentle and dignified at the same time, and—fun. Do you begin to see him?"

"Not entirely," Brad said. He was trying to fit what she'd just told him to the old man in the brownstone house, and to his voice over the telephone threatening to send Jackie back in pieces, unless Brad got out and stayed out.

"I know what you mean," Jackie whispered.

But Brad wondered if she did.

JACKIE frowned. "I hadn't seen him for over a year. I'd been away at school. When I came home today, everything was mixed up. Those two men you saw at the station got on my train at some small town in Connecticut and never took their eyes off me. Grandpa didn't meet me, and that worried me, so I phoned the circus. The two men stayed right outside. I think they were ready to kidnap me when you showed up. Then, you remember, we went on to the old house. I knew Grandpa used to go back there sometimes and walk alone through those empty rooms, though nobody had lived there for years. I went there and told the strange butler who I was. I was surprised to find the house lived in, and yet—I was almost past being surprised by then."

"Quite naturally," Brad commented.

"Then I saw him. I was shocked—even in that dim light, I could see how he'd aged. He didn't seem like himself at all. He seemed glad to see me, and yet he said, 'Jackie, I don't want you here. You'd better go away, and I'll talk to you later.' Just then the doorbell rang."

"I rang it," Brad said.

"Grandpa said it was somebody for a business conference. He told me to wait upstairs."

Brad frowned. "But he must have known—"

"That the house was bare? I suppose so.

Anyway, when I got out of the room, that man was waiting for me. I don't know how he beat us there from the station, or how he got in. The rear entrance must have been open. He pointed a gun at me, and took me upstairs to that empty room. He said he had something to tell me, and that he was on my side, whatever that meant. Then the door opened. He turned toward it. Then I heard a shot, and whoever he was, he fell."

"It was Charley the Matzoh," Brad assured her solemnly. "At least that's who the inspector thinks it was. So?"

"Then I backed into a clothes closet, only there was somebody in ahead of me. All I know is, he was kind of fat. He gave me one awful whack on the side of the head."

Brad was surprised at how angry that made him. "Then you came to in the car? Why didn't you question them?"

"In a way, I was afraid to. How did I know that Grandpa and Link weren't mixed up in it? That Link hadn't gone to the house? How did I know he didn't kill Charley Whatzisname? And—there was always Grandpa." She drew a long, quivering breath. "Brad, I want to go to the circus and talk to Whit Sumner. Grandpa always told him everything. I want to know where Grandpa is. And what this is all about."

Brad nodded. "I'll take you there."

He paid the waitress, and they went out. "I can't understand," he said in a wondering voice, "why I should fall for a screwball blonde mixed up with circuses and gangsters and mysterious grandfathers. You'd think I'd have more sense."

"I can understand why I picked you up at the station," she said. It was almost a whisper. "When I wanted to get away from those men. The more I look at you, the more I understand. Besides being handsome, you've got a Galahad complex. I always thought he was a dope, but I see now he was handy for bedragoned damsels."

Brad caught a glimpse of someone a few doors down the street. That shepherd plaid suit, that sailplane hat, could only belong to the side-kick of the dead man, the one who had been with him at the station.

"You're bedragoned, all right," he said grimly. "Get back inside."

The waitress stared as they sat down in the same booth. Brad waved her away.

"There's still one thing I want to know," Brad said. "Who is—"

A hand dropped on Brad's shoulder. "A hard question for a philosopher, brother. Who am I? Who are you? A question that can take you a lifetime before you got to the bottom of it. And even then . . ."

Brad looked at Jackie. She shrugged, but her eyes were smiling at Salvador Silvius.

"Look, Mr. Silvius," Brad said, "are you a good driver?"

"Do you mean comparatively, or in terms of practicality?"

"Comparatively."

"The answer, brother, is yes. For what makes a good driver? Not a knowledge of the gearbox and how to shoot the juice to a motor, but a sound basic understanding of physics. For a car is nothing but mass in motion, subject to the known laws of physics. . . ."

"Could you ditch somebody following you?" Brad demanded. "Yes or no?"

"In a word—yes."

"Let's go," Brad said. "Somebody will be on our tail. After you love him, I'll tell you where to go."

BRAD helped Jackie into Silvius' cab, and as they pulled away he watched through the rear window. A long dark roadster pulled innocently away from the curb.

"Only one man in the car," Brad said. "Let's call him the Creeper. He must have followed us here. So it seems somebody wants an eye kept on you."

She gasped and was silent for a moment. Then she asked quietly, "Where are we go-

ing?" She put her hand on his sleeve.

"Do you live somewhere, when you're not away at school?"

"My aunt's apartment."

"Good. Write down the address on something, with lipstick if you don't have a pencil. Then I'll get in touch with you tomorrow. I'm going to Madison Square Garden. The core of this situation seems to be there, at the circus."

"I'll go with you. I have a right there. And you won't seem so nosy."

"You're going home. I'll have enough on my mind without worrying about you. And never mind my seeming nosy. I'm the tactful type. Now write down that address."

"You're the domineering type, too," she said. She hunted for a pencil, finally took a lipstick, in a bright plastic container, from her purse. She found an old envelope and wrote on it, slowly and painstakingly.

"All right, here you are. I think you can read this, only it's a little smeary."

Brad tucked it carefully away in his pocket.

"Listen, Brad. How about my worrying about you? These people seem to be playing for keeps."

"You don't need to," Brad said. "In addition to everything else, I'm the cautious type, too." He looked at her thoughtfully. "Just same, it's a nice thought. That you'd worry about me, I mean."

"Don't joke about it," she said in a small voice.

"I'll make you a promise," he said. "I'll be on your doorstep at exactly ten tomorrow morning. Which means I'll have to keep out of trouble."

She smiled, half-believing, half-scared. Then she turned away.

Brad noticed that she had dropped her lipstick on the floor of the cab. He was about to return it to her when he had the sudden thought it would be nice to have something of hers along, until he saw her again. He slipped the bright plastic tube in

his pocket before she turned back to him.

"Brad! Please. Please let me come with you."

"And get yourself snatched again? No, I want you safe. Besides, you saw the corpse too. You're the only one who can convince Inspector Calkins I've got all my marbles."

Salvador had been zigzagging through traffic like a demented crochet needle. Brad noticed with relief that they were in the clear.

"Good work, Salvador. Take the lady home after you drop me at the Garden. And keep an eye on your rear mirror."

"Gotcha. But if you're going to the Garden to see the circus, you're kind of late. Not that this is much of a circus, though. Should have seen the one Claudio staged in ancient Rome. Six hundred and seventy lions. And a Christian for every lion. Balanced economy."

As the cab neared the Garden, Brad called, "Slow down a bit. I'll take it on the fly." He squeezed Jackie's hand, opened the cab door, ready to go.

"Uh, brother, did you get around to reading that little thing of mine yet?"

"Tomorrow," Brad promised. In the next second he had jumped six feet to land on the sidewalk. He went in and out of a drugstore to make sure no one was following him, then made his way back to the Garden.

There was a little trouble getting in at this hour, but he finally convinced a ticket-taker that he knew Colonel Eldredge's manager. He had not gone thirty feet up the ramp when he saw the butler, the man he had last seen creeping out the door, gun in hand.

"Hey! Wait up a minute!"

The man continued on, moving leisurely down a hall lined with dressing rooms. Every few feet a lurid poster presented the very benign face of Colonel Eldredge winking down at him. From inside the arena Brad could hear the distant beat of circus

music. He reached his hand, put one hand on his arm, and turned him around.

The ex-butler had only time enough to kick at a door behind him. It opened, and Brad saw the goatee and twinkling eyes of the Colonel once more. Pushing the butler ahead of him, he moved forward. The Colonel smiled. The door closed behind them. In the next instant something that rang like a brass gong smashed against his temple, and Brad felt himself falling down an endless tunnel.

CHAPTER THREE

Flag of Distress

HE WOKE up with his head full of broken glass. It rattled around when he moved, talking a language pretzels might make. Somebody had left his tongue on the bottom of an aquarium, and then had gone away for the weekend.

First thing you do, Brad thought, is open the eyes. You take one hand, steady it with the other, and pry up the lids. If you can lift a hand.

It must be after ten o'clock. He had to get up and figure a way to get out of here. Out of where?

That crash from up above sounded like a bottle bounced off a rhino horn. A glass factory, then. No, glass factories had no music as far as he knew, nor much shouting, and both were looping around somewhere close by. Football games? A shrill whistle came faintly through the feverish music. Must be a football game. The first football game he had ever attended in bed.

He made his eyes stay open then, and the light rays were fences. Memory came in sudden impulses—the ramp at the Garden, the open dressing room door, the hospitable Colonel. They must have dropped an elephant on him.

He tried opening his eyes again, not looking at the naked bulb overhead. He was on a bed, a clean bed, and the bed was

in a room with a cracked, blue ceiling.

Sitting in a chair, or chairs, a few feet away, were four men. Quadruplets, apparently, for all the men had the same chilled-steel features. Gradually they merged into one figure, and the chairs became a chair. Brad looked at the face of the butler who had met him—all those years ago—at the door of the brownstone house.

"I bid wassa muhassel?" Brad asked.

The butler allowed one corner of his mouth to lift. His almost colorless eyes crinkled fractionally. It wasn't a smile, merely a slight relocation of features.

"Good morning, Mr. Bradbury. A splendid morning, if I may say so. Sunshiny, not too cool, and the market opened on the rise. However I would like to congratulate you on your opening remark."

"Don't mention it," Brad said. He tried to reach a sitting position, fell back. "I tried to say 'I beg your pardon,' and 'what time is it?' and 'What's the matter?' at the same time. Who are you, and how did I get here?"

The butler looked solemn. "Trade secrets are tabu."

Brad compelled himself to sit up. "And roses are red. But how *did* I get here?"

The other studied his immaculate fingernails. "You were chilled. And as to my identity, surely you remember an old sparring partner. Among my associates, my name is Sandbag."

"But what's all this about?"

Sandbag withdrew an object from his side pocket. Under Brad's wavering stare, it focussed itself into a woolen sock. It was hard-packed with sand and neatly knotted.

"To acquaint you extensively with all the circumstances," Sandbag began, "would be indiscreet." He whirled the sock like Daniel Boone playing with a Bowie. "But, A, that noise you hear overhead is a party. This, B, is a sap. If you try to engage the aid of those in A, then B will knock you backside over teacup."

"Why was Jackie snagged? What does

she have to do with it, if I may ask?"

Sandbag yawned. "C, I make the interrogations. You answer." He got out of his chair and sauntered over to the window. With his hands in his pockets, he contemplated the chaotic swarm of Times Square with all the noble detachment of a Montesquieu.

Wobbling to his feet, Brad got out of bed. He stalked his man to within six inches before Sandbag wheeled and got his dukes up. Brad's first punch was blocked; the second whumped home with great indignity. But not before Sandbag brought his sap down hard at the angle of Brad's jaw. Brad reeled back, his senses all at sea.

Sandbag tripped him deftly and pushed him back into bed. "It is high time, Mr. Bradbury, you returned to Bridgeport. My own opinion is that you are merely a town clown on a metropolitan kick. How our affairs concern you is something of an enigma to me. But unless you decide to—uh—blow, things can become calamitous."

"Give me a tremolo with drums," said Brad. "How long do you think you can hold me?"

"More than long enough, Bradbury, more than long enough."

A peculiar knock sounded on the door. It resembled the opening notes of the Toreador Song.

"That will be Spanish O'Brien," Sandbag remarked. "And I counsel you not to stick your chin out. Unfortunately, Spanish does not share my own philosophical detachment."

THÉ door was swung open to admit a little man. He wore a baseball cap and the kind of denim jacket favored by truck drivers. Brad thought he looked a good deal like a country bank teller faced with an endless stream of bum checks. His face wore what might be described as a revolving sneer.

The newcomer demanded of Sandbag,

"Is this the nosey crumb? Let me at him!"

"All in time, Spanish. All in good time."

"Nix ackincray. Whatchu boys been doin'? Playin' Red Rover?"

Brad said, "I understand that on such matters as kidnapping, the Federal boys are not very cooperative. And besides that—"

"A yakker, huh," said Spanish. "Whujja learn?"

"The gentleman was not very expansive before your arrival," Sandbag said. "Undoubtedly he knows more than somewhat. Still . . ."

"Gimme a wet towel," Spanish said.

"Spanish, allow me to remind you that he could create a—"

"Another yakker. Listen, bubblehead, this is the Chelton Hotel. A guest could set off an A-bomb in here, and it wouldn't even show on his bill. So any noise this lug makes is strictly on the house. Gimme that towel."

Sandbag gave him what he asked for.

"Now unnerstan', young feller," Spanish said, "ordinarily rough stuff is out. But you been buttin' your nose in what don't concern ya." With that he whanged Brad on the side of the head with the sodden towel.

The blow stung, then burned. Brad leaped up, only to be wrestled down again by Sandbag. Spanish hit him again, deliberately, conscientiously. Waves of pain broke and swirled inside Brad.

"Now whaddya know?" Spanish demanded.

"This." Brad staggered to his feet. He shoved Sandbag away, ignoring the gun. The towel he ripped out of the other's hands. Then he heaved up Spanish by the lapels and threw him halfway across the room.

Brad shook his head to clear it. Somehow the pain had restored him. As though a bugle had sounded, he felt wideawake and rarin' to go. He started after Sandbag.

Spanish had landed on all fours, as alert

as a cat. "The key!" he croaked to Sandbag. "Gimme the key."

Sandbag was backpedalling fast, taking advantage of every chair and table in Brad's way.

"Throw me the key, you dope!" Without stopping for a reply, Spanish ran across the room, ripped the telephone out by the roots, and pitched it thoughtfully under the bed.

The room key was flapping loose in Sandbag's hand now. He and Brad were circling around the bureau. As Brad feinted an end run, he caught Sandbag coming the other way, and in the same instant, Sandbag threw the key over Brad's head.

It sailed through the air until Spanish caught it in one deft hand, whooped, and went through the bathroom door straight-arm. Brad abandoned his quarry. He got through the door before Spanish could close it. But by that time Spanish had jumped into the bathtub, swept the shower

curtain between them, opened the airshaft window, and dangled the key over empty space.

Brad let out a roar whose lightest syllable would have been banned in Boston, but the key fell, whirling and spinning, to the pavement below.

He collared Spanish and shook him until his wisdom teeth rattled. Spanish squirmed out of his jacket, and was in the clear again. Sandbag came through the bathroom door, with his beloved sap swinging. Brad got his hands on him, swung him powerfully around, and booted him elsewhere like a homeless football.

"Now listen," Spanish complained. "The boss just told us to keep you bottled up. Until after."

"After what?" Brad asked. Then Sandbag returned to the attack. Brad stuck out one foot, and Sandbag went end-over-end. There was only one place for him to go, and he made it on the first play, landing



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with an unhappy *klunk!* in the waiting bathtub.

Sandbag sat up. His eyes were crossed. "One hundred thousand clams and off to Cuba," he said.

"G'wan, you're delirious," Spanish observed. He reached over to the coat-tree behind him, and in one neat movement, jammed Sandbag's derby down over his ears.

On his way out of the bathroom, Brad absentmindedly yanked on the shower. He was feeling a little morose.

"We are now five stories up," Spanish remarked, with rare complacence. "The phone don't live here no more. Too much noise here anyhow for nobody to pay no attention, the door's locked, an' unless your old lady was Pearl White, you're gonna stay on ice. Until after."

Maybe he's right, Brad thought dismal-
ly. By the time I get out of here, the game
will be over. Jackie will be peeved because
I didn't keep our date. Charley the Matzoh
will have died in vain, and before I latch
on to Grandpa, some yegg will be off to
the señoritas with a hundred grand. And
me, I will be marked down as the Bridge-
port bubble that busted.

He caught a flicker of movement in a mirror. He turned, ducked inside the blow, and backheeled Sandbag to a sodden heap on the floor. He wrenched the sap from his hand, and chopped him one for good luck.

"Spanish, you'll have to help me with our friend here. He's making a puddle all over the rug."

Between them they lugged the inert Sandbag back to the bathroom. Spanish was all for filling up the tub. "He'll be more cozy that way. Besides, he ain't been no more use to me than a square bicycle."

Brad shrugged. "Might shrink his shoes, though."

Spanish recovered the derby and set it back in place. "You can't expec' no English gent to take a bath without wearin' his hat."

"Possibly." Brad was thinking. There had to be some way out of this. What would a guy in the movies do?

AFTER watching Spanish reverently fill the tub, an idea struck Brad. He had re-entered the bedroom and opened the window. He was untying Sandbag's weapon, about to unload it on the wind, when the sight of the crowd below struck him. Five stories down, the streets were boiling with the early morning rush. Writhing lines of citizens inched in and out of the subway kiosks, buses hissed a stop while passengers got on and got off, whistles blew, auto horns blared. There must be someone in that crowd below who would respond to an alarm. Brad laid the sandbag beside a huffy pigeon on a ledge and shut the window.

In the bathroom he found a clean towel. Jackie's lipstick was still in his pocket. He ripped a slat out of the nearest window shade and laid the whole business down on top of the bureau. Patiently he worked a couple of holes in the towel with the end of a mechanical pencil. Then after spreading the towel out flat on the glass bureau top, he lettered boldly: KILL THE PRESIDENT! On the reverse side he added: BOMB THE WHITE HOUSE!

"Hey!" Spanish yelped. "Ya subversive, or somethin'? Ya can get arrested for that!"

Brad slipped the slat through the towel, tested it to make sure it would hold, then opened the window and hung out his red-and-white flag.

"Now," he said, "we'll see how indifferent New Yorkers really are."

"Woonja know it," Spanish moaned, eyeing Brad darkly. "Sixteen years now I been outside. Everything apple-pie. No that from this one, no this from that one, no this-and that from the cops. A little box-work, and now and then a sucker, and life is lovely like ice-skating. Matter uh fact, I even voted for Dewey. Now I gotta meet

up with Reds yet! It's against me scruples!"

After ten minutes, there was a discreet rapping on the door. Brad ignored it. The rapping rose to a pounding, and while Spanish made question marks with his eyebrows, Brad let it go on.

"Okay, smart boy, open it up or we break it down!"

"Why not use a key?" Brad suggested.
"Listen, bud, we're the police."

"You still need a key. I'm locked in here."

There was a muttered consultation outside the door. Several keys were tried before the door swung open. Next to the manager, who wore a cherry-red carnation, and a hotel employee standing there with a key-ring around his neck like a turkey's ruff, stood six bluecoats. They all wore the same expression, martyred indignation at the crossroads.

The cops entered the room, one at a time. A small man, who must have stood on tiptoe to meet the physical requirements, confronted Brad. "What goes on here, fella?"

"Well—my name is Bradbury. Edward Bradbury. And—"

Spanish came bustling up. "Listen, Sarge, I didn't have absolutely nothin' to do with this, see? Nothin'. And between you and me, I'm a very good friend of Sherman McManus, an' a life-long Republican."

"Tell me more," said the sergeant.

"You won't nevuh catch a feller like me runnin' the guverment down. Not me. Say, I voted for Hoover twice."

"That's very interesting," the sergeant remarked. "Because it happens that my great uncle was a sachem in Tammany Hall. Now you were saying, Bradbury?"

"Here. This will tell you who I am," Brad said, handing over his wallet.

While the sergeant was studying the wallet, another cop came up with Sandbag. "We found this snoozin' in the bathtub."

Sandbag was a sight to brighten a dry

cleaner's heart. He was splotched and soaking from his derby to his sodden shoes. "I have nothing to say in this present lamentable condition on the grounds that it might degrade me," he announced. "Absolutely nothing!"

A cop nudged him to the hallway. "Nothin' could degrade you, you bum."

The first cop handed Brad back his wallet. "Okay. That flag was a pretty smart idea. Now if you'll come along with us to sign the complaint . . ."

Brad thought of Jackie, waiting. He drew the cop aside and explained the situation, that he had a good lead on a kidnapping, and that if he could have a couple of hours . . . He talked so persuasively that he was free to keep his date, on the understanding that he was to come to the precinct station later.

Down in the hotel lobby Brad phoned the cab company to send Salvador and then sank into a leather chair with a sigh. A wall clock told him that, with maniacal driving, he might get to Jackie's before ten o'clock; if luck held out.

When Salvador arrived, he greeted Brad with a wondering smile. "You look tried, brother, but not found wanting. Get caught in a busy elevator shaft?"

"Sort of. You remember where you took the young lady last night? Think you can make it there by ten sharp?"

"Or get pinched for trying. Let's go."

Twelve minutes later, its tires smoking, the cab squealed to a stop. "By the way, brother, have you had time to read that little—"

"Later," Brad said. He handed over a substantial bill, staggered up the steps and rang the bell.

Jackie herself opened the door. "Brad darling! Your face!"

"Cement mixer." Brad nodded to a desk clock. "Thanks to Salvador, I made it. Ten o'clock straight up."

Then he fell forward, out cold, as she reached to catch him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Off to the Circus

THE quiet was strange and wonderful. And the perfume. And the cool dimness. He realized, once he opened his eyes, that he had never hoped to find restfulness like this. Up to now he had been a man racing a treadmill, and the only give in its rhythm had been furnished by a sandbag, a gun butt, or anything stunning that happened to be lying loose. Restful ease such as this was wonderful.

He opened his eyes and widened them at the middle-aged woman with the pleasant face and lovely green eyes. She had a fair skin. Her hair had once been reddish gold. She looked like Jackie.

"Am I Rip Van Winkle?" said Brad. "You're twenty years older."

She smiled at him. "I'm not Jackie. I'm her Aunt Mattie. Jackie's sprucing up your clothes. She asked me to tell you not to worry about your face. It'll look like new after it's bathed in warm salt water and covered with pancake make-up."

"Pancake make-up," Brad said. "That does it!" He thought things over. "How long have I been passed out?"

"Quite a while. It's getting on toward one."

"I've got to get to the circus as soon as I—say, how did I get undressed?"

"Don't blush," said Aunt Mattie. "I'm a nurse's aide."

"Jackie. Could I see Jackie?"

"If you can move your head," Jackie said from the doorway. "Excuse the apron, but I've been busy. How do you feel?"

"That we'll skip," Brad said. "Listen, Jackie, things are going to happen, and happen fast. How much did you find out?"

"Well, I called everybody I knew."

"Why so?"

"To find out where Grandpa is. And all I learned seems unbelievable. Jerry Cartington—he's a rich man who sometimes

helped Grandpa out of a jam—he tells me Grandpa is going to sell the circus."

"Is that bad?"

"It's plain you don't know my family very well. Would the Huttons sell Woolworth's?"

"I see what you mean. But murder and kidnapping don't usually fit into ordinary business. We've got to locate your grandfather. He's the key to the whole puzzle."

"Well, but first we've got to make you presentable."

Brad sat up. After a moment everything stopped swaying. "What's the matter with me?"

Jackie and her aunt laughed. "You should see yourself," Jackie said. "You look like you were run over by stampeding wrestlers."

Brad sat in a chair while the two women went to work on his face. Afterward Jackie brought him a mirror. He had to admit that, sissy or no sissy, their handiwork enabled him to go out on the street without reminding people of reward money.

"Now you're all set to go out and get beat up all over again," Jackie told him. "Only this time you won't be alone."

Brad shook his head. "You stay put. This is no job for a decoy, even a pretty little lamb like you."

"I'm going. Brad, the minute I turn my back, your face gets all crumpled up. After all, I've got a stake in that face."

"You mean?"

"I made you look human again, didn't I?"

Somehow that seemed to settle it.

They found Salvador waiting in his cab, deep in a copy of *Popular Mechanics*. He greeted them cordially, slapped down the flag, and they headed for the Garden.

"Too much excitement is bad for little girls," Brad said. "Let's wind this comedy up Bingo, just like that."

"Pardon my girlish laughter."

"And what does that say?"

"Brad, I love you for trying. But they've

bounced you around like a baseball. And all for what?"

"I've learned a couple of things. At a price."

"It was certainly no bargain," she said, touching his face.

"Ouch! Listen, this affair is not going to be settled by fluttering your eyelashes. These guys are playing for large dough, large enough that anything goes."

"What's on your program?"

"First, let's talk to Sumner and Carrington. Then maybe your step-brother. After that, I'll think of something."

AT THE Garden they took the elevator to the third floor offices of Colonel Eldredge's show. Whit Sumner was there, and seated beside his desk was a man Brad remembered seeing before.

Jackie introduced Brad, and Sumner came from behind his desk, hand outstretched, all joviality and good humor. He shook hands with Brad and introduced him to the third man. "And this is Mr. Carrington, my old friend—and my new boss."

"Whit, what goes on here?" Jackie demanded. "You can't sell the show without Grandpa!"

Whit Sumner showed her a nice set of teeth in what was a very charming smile. Only the eyes over the charm were as cold as diamonds. And Brad was thinking about when he had seen Carrington before—the fat man moving leisurely down to his car right after Charley the Matzoh had been killed.

"Jackie," Sumner began. "Now baby, there are some things you may be too young to understand."

Jackie jumped to her feet. "That's the second time today I've been called itsy-bitsy. Listen, Whit Sumner, I may be no ball of fire in business but the Eldredge family has owned this show for over fifty years, and if Grandpa were here—"

Carrington appreciated her. There was amusement in his shrewd eyes, but there

was respect as well. "Your grandfather is a great showman, Miss Dalton. None better. I hope he decides to continue advising us, but—"

"Have you a power of attorney?" asked Brad.

"Who is this man, Jackie?" Whit Sumner had a stare that was good as a concealed weapon.

Jackie answered him with, "Suppose I ask the same question he did. What about a power of attorney?"

Sumner opened a desk drawer. He withdrew a contract from among other papers and laid it where they could reach it.

Brad leafed through the legal stationery. "It's waterproof all right," he said at last. "Has the first payment changed hands yet?"

"That's only simple routine," Sumner told him. "As a matter of fact, Jackie, it's nice that a member of the family is here to witness the transaction. After today's performance we'll have the photographers in."

Carrington rose. "Let me send over a stooge, Whit. Never cared for publicity. Sets you up for too many crackpots." He faced Jackie. "For some reasons only he knows, your grandfather insisted on cash. I have it with me. I don't altogether understand, but—"

Sumner laughed. "It's true. Never saw anybody who likes greenbacks the way the Colonel does: Why, I've seen him—"

A Niagara of sound drowned out his remark. It welled up from below in wave after wave, from men, women and children, screams from animals, and over it all the snarling roar of a lion which sent a shudder through everyone in the room.

There was no use trying to talk above that din. Brad couldn't even hear his feet on the stairs as he plunged down two at a time. A quick glance over his shoulder had showed him Jackie, Sumner, and the portly Carrington following him. He pounded down the corridor toward the source of

the din, the fat man panting behind him.

As he raced along, the smell of the circus came to meet him. The odor of animals, sawdust, straw, and something else—fear. Over the roars and cries of caged beasts came the first uncertain notes of the distant band as it struck up to avert a panic.

Brad burst through the inner ring of the crowd.

A few feet beyond the tanbark arena, a man lay crumpled before the open door of a cage. Standing proudly above him, his tail lashing, roaring to keep everyone back, was a full-grown lion. No milksop this, raised in captivity, pampered from birth. Here was a king of beasts, here was royalty, with blazing eyes and a roar that could shatter a barrel.

Brad stiffened. The man lying helpless on the ground was the white-haired old man of the brownstone house. He instantly thought of Jackie but it was impossible to shield the sight from her. Everywhere he turned there was a solid wall of frightened people.

The lion made no move to attack. It whipped the air with its dark-tufted tail, its teeth menacing. Right then a big man in circus uniform bulled his way through the crowd.

"Take him alive, boys," he called. "He's valuable."

The lion wheeled at the voice, his pads audible. He snarled and feinted. The big man broke and ran, throwing something over his shoulder that sounded like, "Use your rifles!"

Brad distinctly saw the lion smile.

Then a newcomer worked his way to the front. This one was compact in build, bronzed and calm.

His arrival brought quiet. He looked at the lion as though it were a fractious child and began talking to it, interspersing his words with crisp orders.

"You can't get away with this, you big dope," he told the cat. Then to the men, "Put a canvas wall around him. Fast. Be-

fore somebody gets hurt." Then to the lion, "You belong in a cage, stupid. You'll get in trouble, running around loose. That's it, boys. Now put the cage where you can leave an opening. I'll keep him quiet."

THETHE animal men began to move swiftly, with brisk, efficient action. Now there was a curious note in the man's voice which, Brad suddenly realized, was the same tone a devoted cat owner would use in talking to a prize Persian.

"You wouldn't like it outside, you know. You don't know about lights and traffic and buses. You'd get scared. Link here is your friend. I don't want some stupid person to get panicked and hurt you. What we're going to do, old boy, is fix up a dark opening. It'll be a cage, but you won't realize that until it's too late. Al, get the hook on the Colonel and pull him out the second Bonzo turns his head. No, Bonzo, don't switch your tail at me."

When the wall was formed, the men beat on the canvas. They shouted. They whistled. They stamped. One fired off blanks. The lion faced this way and that, a tremor ruffling its mane, growled throatily, then leaped for the dark mouth of the cage. It was over.

The ground was bare. The roustabout had yanked the figure on the ground to safety and out of sight behind a line of cages.

Then the crowd began to melt away. Brad followed along, keeping an eye on Link Frost. When they were the only two in the corridor he called out, "Say, hold on a minute!"

Link turned, gauged him carefully, and waited.

"I'm Ed Bradbury. Your sister asked me to look into a few things for her."

"Oh, Jackie. Jackie's a nice kid but—like any other dame she blows her top the minute she gets out of her depth."

Brad smiled. "Drop it, Link."

"Drop what?"

"The hocus-pocus. For some reason of your own you've rung in a phony Grandpa. The man you saved from the lion back there wasn't the Colonel."

"What's that to you?"

"Being a cop, I like to see things neat and clean. Sooner or later that's the way they'll come out."

Link grinned. It wasn't pleasant. "Could be a whole lot later than you think."

When they reached the office, Jackie, Carrington and Sumner were talking earnestly.

"But why didn't Grandpa come here if he wants to sell?" Jackie was demanding. "It's his show. Grandpa—it's not like him to—"

Brad shut the door behind him. "Link can explain that."

Link shook his head. "Sorry, pal." He glanced at his watch. "Getting late. Jerry, did you bring the cash with you?"

Carrington turned to face him. "Sure thing. Right with me."

Link grinned. "Well, unhand it. Let's wind this thing up."

Reluctantly, but somehow proudly, Carrington took out an oversized wallet. He laid it on the desk and turned away. Link opened the flap and fanned the edges of the bills. Each was marked \$1,000.

"Lovely stuff," Link said. "Horses and dames and Miami Beach."

The office door opened suddenly. Brad was astonished to see Spanish and Sandbag. Spanish surveyed the room, spotted the money, and posted Sandbag at the door. Link stood frozen as a gun jabbed his elbow.

"Just keep your yaps shut," Spanish ordered, "and there won't be no trouble."

"How did you boys get out?" Brad asked.

"We got no time to fan the breeze, pal," Spanish said, "but I don't mind givin' the credit to Sharkey the Smiling Bondman."

He picked up the wallet, thumbed the bills affectionately, and then put the whole thing

away in an inside pocket of his jacket.

Sandbag showed his gun, probably in the spirit of overtime, and Spanish, on a sudden impulse, took a cigar out of his pocket and jammed it in Carrington's mouth. "Happy days, pal."

They were gone as quickly as they had come.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Deadly Clowns

CARRINGTON flung the cigar to the floor. Jackie was still wide-eyed. Link wore a fixed grin as though anything at all that happened would delight and amaze him. Sumner tried to reassure himself by studiously re-reading his power of attorney. Brad jumped for the phone.

"Who's the police head in the building?" he asked Sumner.

"Andy Best. But—"

"Hello. Give me Andy Best fast." To Carrington he said, "Okay to offer a reward? Say for a thousand bucks?" Back to the phone. "Hello, Andy Best? I'm calling from Whit Sumner's office. He'll confirm. We've been stuck up. A hundred grand. Close every exit out of the Garden. Nobody in or out until the dough is found. Two men pulled the job. They're still around and it's worth a thousand to the man who grabs them." Then he described Sandbag and Spanish before handing the phone to Whit Sumner.

"Now," said Brad, "which one of you sterling characters is going to help me get that dough back?"

"I'm insured," Carrington said, "and chasing crooks isn't exactly my idea of exercise."

"Link?"

"You haven't a chance," Link said. "They're probably halfway to 34th street by now."

"A fine pair of angle boys you are," Brad told them. He gestured to Jackie to join him

in a private huddle near the doorway.

"Angel, I don't like to tell you this, but your step-brother's in this up to his ears. Unless it gets dangerous, stick close to him. I'm pretty sure he wouldn't hurt *you*. But don't stick that lovely neck out too far."

"Link? But—"

"Just trust me. That's all. Trust me and save the questions for later." He squeezed her shoulders and went out the door.

At the first turn in the corridor Brad found a uniformed guard. The man was watching the performance from the ramp, breathing in time with a girl fifty feet up stepping daintily along a tightwire.

"You see two men come out of Sumner's office back there?"

"Sure did. Went right past me down that way."

Brad looked where he pointed. At that moment the high-wire act ended, the girl went rocketing end-over-end to the net below, and a spotlight swung to the center ring.

The band began to play *Summertime* as a horde of clowns came rushing out, pushing a "burning" building ahead of them. Brad was about to turn away when something funny struck him. Two of the performers there were wearing business suits.

It was a smart move, Spanish and Sandbag would play along with the act, get into clown suits after it was over, then calmly wander across the street for a beer. Simple. Neat. Foolproof.

Where was a better place to hide than the center ring of the circus!

A smile formed in Brad's eyes, "Which way to the ringmaster?"

"Mr. Revere? You'll find him dressing in 26. Down one floor." He was grinning at the clowns. "Looks like the Joes got a new switch today."

"An open switch," Brad said.

A minute later, Brad was knocking at the ringmaster's door. He explained his idea and was pleased to find the ringmaster

was all for it but for one reservation:

"But no shooting, mister. You got 20,000 people out front. One shot and they scare fast as a mouse. No shooting."

Five minutes later Brad stepped into the arena. He wore a white satin costume, a conical hat, and there were spots of red on his face the size of silver dollars. If Spanish and Sandbag were still in the act, they had company.

Under the glaring lights, under the eyes of so many people, Brad felt solemn. He had thought that strolling on before so many people would be easy, that because there were thousands the crowd could be thought of as They, one enormity with myriad faces. But as he walked through the sawdust toward the center ring, he was glad of the little dog perched on his shoulder. The dog was stuffed calico, but it gave Brad a chance to pretend a nonchalance he did not feel. A chance to keep his eyes away from the faces that sprang out of the crowd, the box full of laughing kids on crutches, the white-haired old lady who shook a bag of crackerjack like a tambourine, the Korean veteran who contemplated the circus with wonder that such things still could be.

The "burning" building was blazing by now. Up came a horse-drawn fire engine to the scene. At once the whiskered babies, half in lace bonnets, half in derby hats, set up a clamor to be the first one rescued. One of the engine's wheels rolled off in protest against a backfire that sounded like raspberry. Then the steering gear came unstuck, and the driver, brave in scarlet polka dots, went around turning handsprings to assure everyone that everything was all right.

Spanish had his gun out by now. When he flourished it to force a clown to undress, the crowd took it as another hilarious bit of nonsense. Across the ring, Sandbag was carrying out the same routine.

ONE of the clown horses managed to get his foot stuck in a bucket. At once the stubborn animal sat down, refus-

ing to even wiggle an ear until his rider had shod him snugly with buckets on all four feet. He reared up and went galumphing around and around, unwinding a fire hose behind him. A six-foot-three clown on the roof, clad in a long white baby dress, set up a holler. He gestured wildly for help, yodeling and waving as a distress flag a pair of three-cornered pants.

Brad stepped into the center ring. The clown was arguing with Spanish. "Listen, pal, underneath I got on just shorts. Peppermint striped shorts. Have a heart."

"G'wan," said Spanish, "you're out here to make 'em laugh. Peel." Then he recognized Brad, and leveled the gun on him. The clown retreated.

Brad and Spanish faced each other in silence, while around them white horses trotted gaily, and the clown fire company casually pulled a landing net to pieces.

"This is the pay-off, Spanish. I'm taking that money away from you."

"In yer granny's pig's eye. I rub you out here and everybody thinks its part of the act."

"The exits are blocked, Spanish." The other's gun wavered a trifle. "And you're doing your stuff in front of 20,000 witnesses."

The rest of the clowns continued in their horseplay, stealing sidelong glances at the drama going on in their midst.

"You can't con me out of this," Spanish said. But by his tone, Brad knew that he could.

"Consider this. You give up and it's an easy 1 to 3 for attempted robbery. Snatching me we'll throw out. But you lam, and you'll have every man, woman and child here turned against you for the reward money. If you could get out of the Garden, you won't be able to sleep. Because anybody who gets one look at you will finger you. And down in Mexico or Cuba everything will cost triple because the boys know



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you're hot. Everybody you meet will—"

Brad had moved in until Spanish was within arm's length. "To hell with that," Spanish said.

Right then Brad made his move. He left his feet in a flying tackle. The gun went up like a semaphore arm, its bullet exploding against the rooftop. Brad wrenched the weapon away and tossed it to a passing clown.

The six-foot-three baby jumped. He landed in a squat, straightened up, and ambled over to where Brad sat on Spanish. "Okay, buster, we'll take him off your hands."

The band had been playing softly. Now at a signal from the first clown, it burst into *Stars and Stripes Forever*.

The giant baby gathered up Spanish, tucking him neatly under his arm like a football. On the other side of the ring, a galloping clown horseman whooped and snatched Sandbag off the ground, threw him across the horse's neck, and went trotting around and around, ducking Sandbag's head in a series of bows. Piqued at being outdone, the giant baby angrily mouthed his cigar, calmly scratched a match on his prisoner's pants, and marched off, puffing, into the wings.

The crowd loved it.

* * *

"But how did you know there were two Grandpas?" Jackie asked.

"You would have realized it, too, if you hadn't been all upset by what happened at the station. Even then, you said that the one you saw at the brownstone house didn't seem like himself. And then the man you described was so completely different in character from the phony one. The phony wanted to get rid of you because you might pu a crimp in his plans. Finally, when Link rescued the phony from the lion, he did it in such a coldblooded way that anybody could see he didn't care, that the man in danger was only a stooge."

"And Link and Whit Sumner were behind it all?"

"Sure. Link and Sumner planned to make a killing by selling the circus while your real grandfather was away on a long vacation. As usual, when going away for any length of time, he gave Sumner a power of attorney. By the way, your real grandfather is flying home today."

Jackie squeezed his hand.

"Link and Sumner found an old actor who could impersonate your grandfather, and fixed up one room of the old house for business conferences, thinking to fool Carrington. But Carrington was even cuter. He planned to gain control of the circus and then hijack the purchase price. Which is where and why Spanish and Sandbag came in. He had been playing them all along."

Brad sighed wearily. He was tired, and the pancake makeup, under the remains of the clown makeup, was beginning to itch. "Well, Inspector Calkins has them all down at Headquarters. He even paid me a compliment. Said he guessed I wasn't crazy after all. Only mis-educated."

"But who killed Charley the Matzoh?"

"Carrington. The Inspector matched the gun up with his. Probably Charley the Matzoh got a little too cute. My guess is, he tried to play both ends against the middle, and Carrington found him a little too expensive. And evidently his pal, the Creeper, got the hint, and lammed. Incidentally, Carrington's the man who bopped you on the head in the closet."

"Such a nice man, too!" said Jackie, rubbing the back of her head. "Darling, didn't I tell you I'd picked you as a winner the first time I saw you?"

"As I recall," Brad said, "you were distinctly chilly."

Jackie put her arms around him. "You could thaw me out."

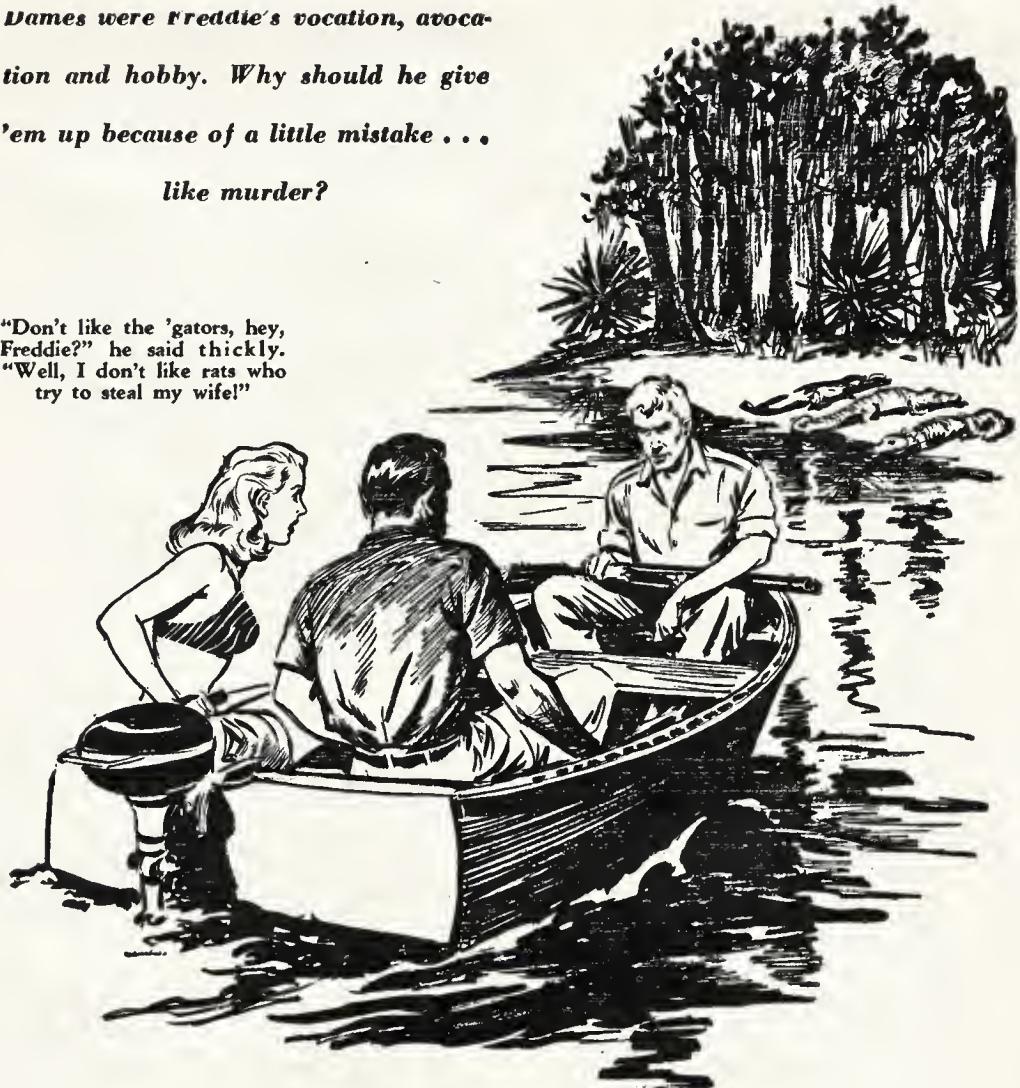
"That I intend to take up at the first opportunity."

"This is it," said Jackie.

• • •

Dames were Freddie's vocation, avocation and hobby. Why should he give 'em up because of a little mistake . . . like murder?

"Don't like the 'gators, hey, Freddie?" he said thickly.
"Well, I don't like rats who try to steal my wife!"



LADY-KILLER

By LARRY HOLDEN

FREDDIE was standing at the end of the municipal dock, glaring at the bay and the great restless Gulf of Mexico beyond, when a hearty hand fell on his shoulder and a still heartier voice exclaimed:

"Well, bless my little pointed head, if it isn't Freddie Pell! How are all the nasty little tricks, Freddie? And how come you left Sarasota in such a hurry?"

Freddie stiffened and, without turning, said, "Beat it, cop."

"Ah now, Freddie, that's no way to talk to an old friend. And we are old friends, aren't we, Freddie?"

"I said beat it, Riley. I don't like you."

"I'll tell you, Freddie, it's like this. The Chief called me into his office yesterday afternoon and said to me, 'Riley,' he said, 'take a run down to Sanivel and have a little talk with Freddie Pell. Maybe he's had a change of heart. Maybe he'll tell you about how he beat Mrs. DeLong over the head with a hammer and pocketed fifty thousand bucks worth of tiaras and stuff.' " Riley's voice turned somber, "You shouldn't have done that to Mrs. DeLong, Freddie. She died yesterday morning. There were too many splinters of fractured skull in her brain. They couldn't get them all out."

"Beat it, beat it." Freddie sounded bored. "You had me down at headquarters three days, didn't you? And you had to let me go, didn't you? What more do you want?"

"The truth, Freddie, that's all. Just the pain, unvarnished truth."

"Drop dead, will you? You're pathetic."

"What's the matter, Freddie? You look kind of down in the dumps. Aren't there any dames around? That must be pretty rough for a chaser like you. Or maybe you're smart, coming to a little place like Sanivel, with no dames. I guess you know by this time that dames are your weakness. I'll bet that's why you swatted Mrs. DeLong and grabbed off her assorted jewelry. It takes dough to be a full-time chaser. Did I hit the nail right on the head, Freddie?"

Freddie did not bother answering, and his thin, sallow face showed nothing but contempt.

"Well," said Riley finally, "maybe I'm living in a fool's paradise, but I think I'll hang around Sanivel for a while, just in case you feel the need of soul-cleansing confession one of these dark nights. Take care of yourself, Freddie."

Riley turned and ambled down the dock, a big, loose-framed man with an amiable face that became as grim and hard as January ice the moment his back was to Freddie.

GLARING murderously, Freddie watched him go, then spat over the edge of the dock into the water. One of these dark nights Riley was going to get himself a hole in the head.

And what the hell, Freddie thought angrily, the DeLong dame had asked for it. If she hadn't awakened and started to yell, he wouldn't have laid a finger on her. He had even kind of liked her, in fact. He'd been her chauffeur for six months, and she was a nice old dame. The one night she didn't take her sleeping pill, he thought resentfully! Aah, the hell with it. They didn't have anything on him, and they weren't going to get anything on him. The stuff was in a safe deposit box in Fort Myers, and it could stay there until the heat was off. He'd grabbed off twenty-five hundred in bills that the cops didn't know about, and he could live for a year on that, if necessary.

Freddie's savage stare turned heavy and morose. Riley was right about one thing—Sanivel was a dump, no dames. Not that he hadn't been given the eye—unconsciously he inflated his skinny chest—but who wanted to mess with those forty-year-old hags around the hotel?

Now if this were Miami Beach . . . He let the thought dangle. He was smart enough to know that Miami Beach was out of the question. Twenty-five hundred bucks wouldn't last very long down there. Miami Beach could wait.

At first he paid no attention to the cabin cruiser out on the bay. He didn't like boats, or fishing, or swimming, or anything to do with the water. He came down to the municipal dock only because it was cooler here. He wouldn't have given the Mighty Mo a second glance, but the thirty-foot

cruiser out on the bay was behaving in such an erratic fashion that it caught his eye. It was traveling at top speed with a gleaming white ruff of foam at the bow. Such large craft, after entering the bay from the gulf, usually proceeded in a straight line at a stately pace, but this one was swooping in curves, heeling over in the turns, showing the dull red of its copper-painted bottom.

Freddie thought, *He's soused!* and, grinning, waited for the cruiser to run violently aground, but by some miracle the boat remained in the channel. Then, as it sped closer, he saw two figures struggling for possession of the wheel. His grin widened. A fight!

With satisfaction, he noted that the boat was heading for the dock—still at full speed. In just about three minutes it was going to ram head-on into the heavy pilings with a smashing impact. Freddie moved back about six feet. He did not want to be hit by any of the flying debris, but neither did he want to miss the fun. The grin twitched on his lips and he leaned forward with anticipation.

Then, to his intense disappointment, the smaller of the two figures snatched up the fire extinguisher and brought it down on the head of the other. The speed of the boat was cut immediately, and it dug its nose into the water as it slowed abruptly. The motor was cut entirely and it drifted slowly toward the dock. The figure scrambled, panting, from the cabin to the cockpit. Freddie's pale eyes lighted when he saw that it was a girl.

"Can you give me a hand?" she cried helplessly. "I—I can't dock it."

Freddie gave his chartreuse nylon slacks a little hitch and strutted to the edge of the dock. "Throw me a rope, sweetheart," he called. "I'll take care of you." And to himself he grinned, *In more ways than one!*

She was a small girl, blonde, and her shorts and halter showed a figure that brought a low whistle from his lips. His

weakness was women, but blondes were a specialty. His greedy eyes did not miss the roll of a muscle or the turn of a curve as she searched the cockpit for a line long enough. This, he made up his mind, was worth going after.

He caught the line she threw him, and within a few minutes the boat was securely moored with fenders dangling from the side to keep it from rubbing the pilings. Freddie dropped down into the cockpit, touching his hair to make sure the carefully nurtured wave had not been disturbed. He knew how to make an impression. Dames were his vocation, avocation and hobby.

"Been having a little trouble, sweetheart?" he asked, tilting his chin toward the cabin where the man lay unconscious on the floor.

She avoided his eyes, as if she were ashamed. "Would—would you mind helping me get him into the bunk?" she whispered. "I don't want to leave him there."

"Soused, eh?"

"Ever since we left St. Petersburg," she said bitterly. "All he does is drink. I'm just about fed up."

Freddie grinned down at her. She was four inches shorter than his five feet six. This was the kind of a set-up he liked; a drunken husband and a discontented wife. A pushover for a real operator like himself.

"Aaah, leave him lay, sweetheart," he advised. "Any jerk that'd hit the bottle when he's got a classy little number like you around deserves everything he gets. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

She glanced at the big man on the floor and compressed her generous mouth. "You're right," she said. "I'm going to let him lie there for a change. I'm so tired of catering to him and putting him to bed when he gets like this that I could scream. We'll lock him in so he can't fall overboard and drown himself, though what loss that would be, I don't know." She looked at

Freddie, "I like you. You're very frank."

"Naaah, I'm not Frank, I'm Freddie, ha, ha, ha."

She smiled at him. "I'm Lois. I—I . . ."

Her smile quivered and broke, and she burst into tears.

He put his arms around her and held her much closer than was necessary, smirking down at the top of her honey-blonde head.

"Come on," he said. "What you need is to get soused yourself. I'll take care of you."

"Th-thanks, Freddie. I need something."

"Then what're we waiting for? Let's go!"

SHE locked the cabin door, giving the man on the floor a last scathing glance. Freddie helped her up to the dock from the cockpit, restraining an excessive use of his hands, which was quite a feat for him. But he had appraised this girl rather shrewdly as *class*, and he knew he couldn't rush things. She took his arm as they walked down the dock.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said gratefully. Then her hand tightened convulsively and she gave a little scream. "Freddie! Look!"

He followed her pointing finger. An eight-foot alligator was crawling sluggishly out of the bay and up on the white sand of the shore.

"Just a 'gator," he said uneasily. "The bay's full of them on account of the rains. They come down the river."

She shivered. "They're so ugly. Aren't they dangerous?"

"One of them almost killed a kid down at Fort Myers last week. But don't worry, sweetheart. If one of them comes crawling up behind us, I'll let him have it!"

He made a swift, furtive movement with his hand, and she gasped, for he was holding a gun, concealed inside his heavily padded jacket. He made the same motion in reverse, and the gun disappeared.

"I'll let him have it," he repeated with bravado.

"D-do you always carry a gun?" she stammered.

"Sure. I got a permit." And it was the truth. He did have a permit. Mrs. DeLong had obtained it for him—another thing that had been overlooked, though the Sarasota police could hardly be blamed, for the permit had been issued in Tallahassee. "You don't have a thing to worry about when you're with me, sweetheart," he told Lois with a significant wink.

But he kept glancing back nervously when they walked up the beach from the end of the dock.

Things did not go at all the way he would have liked in the tavern. She did not get even the slightest bit tiddley. She drank two martinis and that was all, despite the fact that he kept telling her that three or four more would do her good. And she wouldn't talk about anything but her husband.

His name was Ernie Lockridge, and he was an ex-fullback. He didn't have a cent. She had all the money. He didn't have to work. Maybe that was why he drank. She wanted a divorce, but he wouldn't give her one. He loved her (he said) and was insanely jealous. Another time he had told her he would consent to a divorce if she settled thirty thousand dollars on him and gave him the *Fly Boy*. The *Fly Boy* was the boat. She wouldn't do it.

"I won't be blackmailed!" she tearfully told Freddie.

"That's a big chunk of dough," said Freddie slowly.

"It's not so much, really. I'd gladly give it to him *now*, but I'm afraid to mention divorce, he's so insanely jealous. Sometimes I live in absolute terror."

Freddie watched her from behind his pale noncommittal eyes.

"A guy like that," he said, "is better off with a hole in his head."

"You mustn't talk like that," she whis-

pered, but he could see she didn't mean it.

The subject was dropped.

Freddie gave up trying to get her drunk. The plot had changed. It had bigger possibilities than a one night stand. His instinct for women told him how to play this, and he acted a reasonable facsimile of a gentleman. Instead of urging her to drink, he told her she'd had enough and what she needed was a good dinner.

"You're nice," she told him, her eyes swimming.

After dinner, she wanted to go for a walk on the beach. Freddie was not very happy about it, but he bought a big flashlight in the drugstore and kept hosing the beam of light all around them as they walked.

"There aren't any 'gators out here, Freddie," she said. "The water is too salt. You don't need that tremendous light."

Peevishly, he told her if she wanted her leg chewed off, he didn't. Not that he was afraid, he added hastily, but why take chances? He did not even put his arm around her until they were safely on the little fishing dock behind the South Wind Motel. He was so incredulous when she responded eagerly to his very first kiss that he did not follow up in his usual let's-go style. When he did recover and tried to press his advantage, she shivered and pushed him away.

"No, Freddie, no," she whimpered. "My husband would kill us if he ever found out. Take me back to the boat. Please take me back to the boat. You've got me all mixed up. I—I've got to think. Please, Freddie."

He grinned in the darkness. He had scored!

"I know just how you feel, sweetheart," he purred. "It smacked me, too."

"We've got to keep our heads, Freddie. We've got to think this out!"

"Yeah. We gotta figure the angles."

On the way back, she said soberly, "This is going to sound dreadful, Freddie, but the next man I marry has to have

money of his own. He doesn't have to have much, but enough so he doesn't feel dependent. That's what ruined Ernie."

He just squeezed her arm.

She wouldn't let him take her any farther than the foot of the dock. Ernie might be sober, and he'd go crazy if he saw her with another man. She gave him a quick, breathless kiss, murmured, "Good night, darling," and ran up the dock.

Freddie walked back to the hotel in a state of high elation. Riley was leaning against the arch of the entrance, smoking a cigar. He took the cigar from his mouth and tapped off the ash with his forefinger.

"Congratulations, Freddie," he said. "That was a sweet little number you were squiring around tonight. Looked like a nice girl, too. Maybe I should have a little talk with her."

Freddie gave him a feral sidelong glance and walked into the hotel without a word. Riley pursed his lips in a silent whistle and reminded himself to stay out of dark alleys and to watch his step when he walked in the shadows. Freddie was a dangerous little animal.

IT WAS barely nine the next morning when Lois called Freddie and asked him to meet her at the bridge across Alameda Parkway.

"I've packed a box lunch," she said, sounding far, far too gay. "We're going to have a picnic, darling. Don't you love picnics?"

Freddie hated picnics! There was only one way to eat, and that was in restaurants with plenty of service.

But he said, "Yeah, sure, and don't forget to bring the ants, ha, ha, ha. See you in a half hour, sweetheart."

She whispered, "Darling," and hung up.

He was there promptly, clad in snake-skin sandals, lemon yellow nylon slacks, and a hand-stitched chocolate brown sport shirt with a monogrammed pocket. He scowled when he saw her come chugging up the

bay in a rowboat equipped with an outboard. A boat, yet! She waved, and he waved back, raising a sour grin. She beached the boat under the bridge, where he could step into it without getting his feet wet. He was afraid of boats, and he hated them. Teetering like a man walking a clothesline over Niagara Falls, he inched his way to the stern and sat down beside her. He kissed her immediately. She strained away from him.

"Relax," he said irritably. "Nobody can see us here."

"Oh, Freddie!" she cried. "It's dreadful, isn't it? I mean, having to be like this. He's always skulking around, spying on me. He frightens me. Look at this!" She touched a small cut on her cheekbone. "He hit me. He was drunk again when I got back to the boat last night. He demanded to know where I'd been. He was furious. He said he knew I'd been with a man because I had that gooey look on my face. Then he hit me. Freddie, I swear I'll kill him if he ever lifts a hand to me again, and it'll be self-defense, because one of these days he'll kill me!"

Freddie hesitated for just a fraction of a moment, but his instinct told him that this was the moment. He unbuttoned his shirt and slipped his gun from the holster under his left armpit. He held it out to her on the palm of his hand.

"If he smacks you again," he said, "let him have it!"

She stared at the gun with widening eyes, and slowly she reached for it. "I—I couldn't," she whispered.

He touched the gun with his finger. "That's the safety catch," he said. "I'm pushing it off, see? All you have to do is pull the trigger."

She lowered her head, hiding her face, and quickly slid the gun into the lunch hamper. "Sit up in the bow, Freddie," she said in a smothered voice. "We've got too much weight back here. We'll ship water."

Freddie's exultation was so great that he

didn't mind the boat any more. He had given her the gun, and she would do the job, and *she'd* get away with it, too. He moved up to the bow of the boat and pushed off.

They chugged up-river, up into the wasteland of palmetto, mangrove, water-oak festooned with ghostly Spanish moss, into the silence. It gave Freddie the creeps. Lois smiled at him tremulously.

"This is the one place he can't follow us," she said. "Oh Freddie, some day we won't have to skulk like this. Look at those alligators! Thank heavens we won't have to go ashore!"

Freddie had looked at those alligators. They were all along the banks, sunning themselves on the shore, all sizes, from three-foot midgets to twelve-foot monsters; ugly, corrugated nightmares, brought down-river by the rains and the increasing freshness of the bay. Freddie crouched in the bow of the boat, hardly able to conceal his almost superstitious fear of them, a fear that was rooted in the racial fear of all reptiles.

They anchored midstream, just off the dock of an abandoned citrus grove. Lois looked longingly at the shore with its shade and promising coolness, but they did not dare go ashore, for the banks were alive with crawling 'gators. Freddie never had a more miserable lunch or a more miserable time. He would not move in the boat for fear of tipping, and as much as he wanted to kiss Lois again, he was relieved when she let him off under the Alameda Bridge that afternoon, promising to meet her again the following morning.

They could not meet at night, for she could not keep Ernie locked in the cabin, and she was afraid that he would kill them if he found them together.

"If he hits me again, darling," she whispered, "I'll . . . I'll let him have it!"

"Just pull the trigger," he said, trying to keep the lift out of his voice.

"Just pull the trigger," she repeated.

A week, a full week, went by, and Ernie Lockridge was still alive. Freddie's impatience was at the boiling point. Every day he met Lois under the Alameda Bridge, and every day they chugged upstream, and every day he kissed her exactly once before they pushed off, though he could see it was tearing her apart. But she had not pulled the trigger.

ON THE night of the eighth day, Freddie waited at the foot of the municipal dock and watched Ernie Lockridge come down the walk. He followed Ernie into town and waited outside the tavern while Ernie sat inside and drank. Ernie did not come out until closing. Freddie followed him down the street, keeping in the shadows of the big pineapple palms. Twice Ernie staggered to a tree and put his finger down his throat, then went staggering on, shaking his head like a man trying to relieve himself of an intolerable burden. Freddie followed, a half block behind.

He knew just the place where an accident was going to happen to Ernie Lockridge. The foot of the municipal dock. The shadows were deep there, shadows thrown by a huge clump of date palm. There the beach shelved off sharply, and the bank had been piled with travertine rock to protect it against the gnawing tides. A fall from the walk into the rocks could kill a man. Especially if the man were drunk—and pushed!

There were ten blocks down Sanivel Drive from the tavern to the dock. Ernie Lockridge was very drunk. His head was sunk between his tremendous shoulders, and he had to plant his legs far apart to keep his balance on every step. Damn, he was big! Six feet four and two hundred and sixty pounds, a mountain. Freddie weighed a hundred and forty, but the liquor had more than cut down the difference between them.

They were but a block from the dock when a red eye gleamed from the shadow of a huge pineapple palm and Riley lounged out to the sidewalk, taking the cigar from his mouth.

"Now, Freddie," he said, "you wouldn't be thinking of rolling a drunk, would you? Or maybe I should have kept my big mouth shut. Maybe I should have waited and caught you in the act, as the feller says."

It was a terrific shock, but Freddie bridged it. "I don't roll drunks, cop," he jeered. "I cut their throats and donate the blood to the blood bank. Gimme a light."

He put a cigarette between his lips and leaned forward. Riley touched the end of the cigarette with the ember of his cigar.

"Going back to the hotel, Freddie?" he asked pleasantly. "Mind if I walk back with you? Gets lonesome down here." In the glow of the cigar, Freddie could see that Riley's round, amiable face was beginning to show signs of strain.

AMAZING THING! By Cooper

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"Why not?" he said carelessly. "Nothing like a police escort into town, is there, cop?"

"Nothing like it," agreed Riley grimly. "How'd you like a police escort back to Sarasota, Freddie?"

"Why not?" Freddie grinned. "Let's go."

Now he was glad he had not pushed Ernie Lockridge into the rocks. He had a better idea, an idea that would get rid of both Riley and Ernie at the same time. It involved the pleasant business of smacking Riley over the head and getting his gun. A bullet through Riley's head would be half the job, and another slug with the muzzle pressed against Ernie Lockridge's chest would be the other half.

**OFFICER KILLED
FIGHTING DRUNK**

A pushover, a natural!

Back at the hotel, he invited Riley into the bar for a drink, but Riley shook his head.

"Thanks, Freddie," he said, "but no thanks. It'd take only one drink to set me off, the way I feel, and if I shoved your nasty little face down your throat, we'd both be sorry. I'll take a rain check till I can have a last drink with you in the death house."

Freddie showed his teeth in a mirthless grin.

"Cops," he said pityingly. "Cops!"

He felt much better about meeting Lois under the Alameda Parkway bridge the next morning. Now that things were set in his mind, there was no uncertainty. It was merely a question of time and opportunity.

He waved with an honest grin when he spied Lois chugging up the bay in the boat, then scrambled down the bank under the bridge. Half way down, he dug in his heels and tried to backtrack, for there in the angle of the buttress stood Ernie Lock-

ridge with a shotgun cradled in his arm. The muzzles of the gun looked like the entrance to the Holland Tunnel.

Ernie said ominously, "Wave her in, hot-shot, or I'll blow the middle out of you."

His joints all jello, Freddie stood on the bank as Lois nosed the boat into the shore. Ernie stepped out from behind the buttress, and Lois screamed. Ernie grinned whitely.

"Get in, hot-shot," he ordered Freddie. "We're going for a boatride. Take us up-river," he snarled at Lois.

Her hands shaking, her face the color of biscuit-dough, Lois toolled the boat from under the bridge and pointed the bow toward the waste of palmetto and mangrove.

ERNIE sat in the bow, facing them, the twin muzzles of the shotgun resting on his knee. From time to time, he glanced over his shoulder, and when they reached the rotting dock of the abandoned citrus grove, he ordered:

"Pull in there and tie up!" His heavy, muscular face was gray and studded with unshaven stubble; his eyes were malignant and bloodshot. He twitched the shotgun.

"Get out, both of you. You, woman, take that coil of rope!"

Freddie's hand slid stealthily under his shirt for his gun, then he let it fall in dismay when he remembered that he had given it to Lois. His knees barely held him as they went up the bank. Not fifty feet away, the 'gators were nosing into the mangrove. Ernie grinned.

"Don't like the 'gators, hey, Freddie?" he said thickly. "Too many sharp teeth, hey? Well, I don't like rats who try to steal my wife, so we're even—except I'm going to be evener. Tie him up to that cabbage palm, woman!"

Lois stood with the line in her hands, stiffly defying him until he swung the twin muzzles of the shotgun until they were trained full on Freddie's breast.

"I'm loaded with buckshot," he said

gloatingly, "and I'd just love to blow the guts right out of him. Tie him up!"

Freddie was almost fainting with terror when he backed against the rough trunk of the cabbage palm and Lois wound the rope around him. Ernie pulled the knots excruciatingly tight, then stepped back.

"That'll hold you, Romeo," he said. "And after we leave, the 'gator'll start coming up and nibbling on your toes. You'll never fool around with another man's wife, pal. You're finished." He jerked the gun at Lois. "Get in the boat."

She cried, "Ernie, wait! Ernie! Don't leave him here. The 'gators'll kill him. I'll give you anything you want. I'll give you what you asked for. I'll give you thirty thousand dollars and the *Fly Boy*. Don't leave him here, Ernie!"

His face congested. "I'm finished taking money from a woman," he yelled at her. "I'm finished, you understand? I'm finished!"

Freddie screamed, "Wait, wait! I'll pay you! Wait!"

Ernie turned. "You'll pay me?" he asked slowly. Then, contemptuously, "With what, hot-shot?"

"I've got it," Freddie babbled in an ecstasy of terror. "I've got it, I can pay you, I've got it, fifty thousand bucks! I can pay you!"

"Fifty thousand bucks," Ernie jeered. "Sure. And all I've got to do is write a slogan to win it. Fifty thousand bucks!"

Don't kid me, pal. Get in that boat, woman!"

"No!" Freddie screamed. "You've got to believe me! I tell you I've got fifty thousand bucks."

Ernie hesitated. "Okay. I'll play, hot-shot. Where's this fifty thousand bucks?"

Practically collapsing from relief, Freddie told him. In a safe deposit box in Fort Myers. The key to the box had been sent General Delivery to Frederick S. Pell, Fort Myers, Florida.

Ernie growled, "How do I know you're on the level?" The muzzle of his gun swung between Lois and Freddie.

Freddie cried, "I sent the key registered mail. The receipt is in my wallet. I—" His jaw fell away.

Ernie lowered the muzzle of the gun, and Riley stepped from behind a clump of wild oleander. There was no triumph in Riley's face, only a bitter weariness, as if he had not slept for weeks.

"Let's go, Freddie," he said tiredly. "When you're in the death house, I'll have that drink with you. And thanks, you guys." He turned to Lois and Ernie. "I never thought I'd have any use for private detectives until the chief turned this rat loose, but you two are tops. If ever you're in Sarasota, just mention my name. The town's yours!"

There was a road not ten yards from the river bank, and Riley headed Freddie into his car.

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THE QUIET TYPES

The winner of an essay on fire prevention was arrested in Ann Arbor, Mich., on a charge of burning down a schoolhouse.

* * *

A Schenectady, N.Y., man was hauled off to jail after he confessed that he made a practice of taking parking tickets off autos because he felt sorry for the absent drivers.

* * *

A Bakersfield, Cal., man was marched off to jail for beating up a cafe pianist who refused to play his request.

* * *

Two Pittsburgh railway employees were arrested for stealing 250,000 electric bulbs.

—H. H.

By RICHARD GOGGIN



He thought foolishly, She shouldn't be doing this. . . .

FOR OLD CRIME'S SAKE

"Till death do us part," she had said. And she'd only kept one little thing from Tommy—it was his death she had in mind!

IT'S HARD to tell just what brings a divorce. Little things that pile up one on top of the other may do it, or a big thing that tears six or eight years to pieces in a few seconds. Something goes wrong—something that touches off all the stifled bitternesses, all the tiny bickering, all the eating little angers you never told each other about. Then it happens. The sink is dirty once too often, or the coffee's weak

when she knows you like it strong. It blows, and that's it.

That's it—except when the one getting pushed out doesn't go for it. That's the way it was with Tommy Perrin and his wife.

"You wouldn't have the nerve, Tommy," she told him.

They lived in a San Francisco flat on Waller street, five rooms, very old, with the kitchen at the rear of the house facing a small porch. She stood next to the washing machine, kind of backed up against the door leading to the porch.

"Why don't you go down to the office and go to work? You'll forget about it by tonight."

"This time you're wrong, Agnes. You're way out in left field." He looked down at the kitchen table and then back at her before he realized he was still holding a crumpled napkin in his hand. "I'll have Joe Hyson give you a ring." He waited a second longer and then tossed the napkin on the table.

She seemed to realize that he meant it, and she came away from the door, talking rapidly. "Aren't you forgetting something, Tommy? Aren't you forgetting our little secret? Do you think Joe Hyson's a good enough lawyer to get you out of that?"

He watched her walking toward him until she stood face to face with him, breathing very quickly. Then he said, "I don't care, Ag. I don't give a damn."

She drew back as if he'd hit her in the face. "Big talk," she said. But she acted as if something were slipping from her fingers that she'd never expected to lose, a thing she'd counted upon as surely as her next breath. "You'd better think it over, Tommy. You'd better think it over very carefully. I'd hate to have anything destroy our great love for each other."

She threw the words out one after the other with no hesitation, but it was there, a strange little quiver he'd never heard before. And he nearly hesitated because

he'd thought he'd known her completely. He knew each move she made when she got out of bed in the morning, which slipper she put on first, which hand she opened the bathroom door with, each tiny familiar movement and sound she made. But he began to realize he might not have known her as well as he thought.

"I thought it over," he said. "It doesn't add up any more." He watched for a second longer and then said, "It never has added up."

He walked over to the coat closet, took his hat and coat from it, closed the door carefully, and walked down the carpeted hallway of the flat and on down the long steep flight of stairs. At the bottom of the stairs he stopped for a moment, as if to get his bearings, and then he opened the door and walked out into Waller street.

"What do you think she'll do, Tommy?" Hyson leaned back in his swivel chair and watched him.

"I don't know. The way I feel I don't give a damn."

"Probably. But you have to think about it. I can file a suit. That's easy, but a divorce only begins there. Will she kick up a fuss?"

"You know her, Joe. She'll probably raise hell."

"Is that all?"

"What do you mean?"

"She's a hot-headed woman, that's what I mean."

"What are you asking me? Am I scared of her?"

Hyson leaned forward in his chair and said, "Yes. That's exactly what I'm asking you. Women do funny things when a guy kicks them out." He drummed on the table for a minute. "You've wanted out for a long time, haven't you?"

"That's right."

"How come you never went for it before?"

"Listen, Joe, I want a divorce. I'm getting it so I won't have to listen to her

anymore. I don't want to listen to you either."

Hyson shrugged his shoulders. "If you want an operation, you tell your doctor what's wrong, don't you? A divorce is like an operation—only you do it yourself and it's more painful. What are you trying to cover, Tommy?"

He wondered for a moment whether to tell him, and he tried to figure what Agnes would do. But all the time her knowledge was like a sharp little knife she'd been using to cut him to pieces with for fifteen years. "You go ahead and start the fireworks, Joe. What happens, happens."

Hyson shrugged again. "It's your funeral." He pressed a buzzer on the desk. When the secretary came in, he said, "Mr. Perrin's getting a divorce. Take his statement, will you?"

WHEN he called Agnes up the first time, she hung up in his ear. The next time she said, "Your friend, Hyson, called me. You can tell him for me it'll be a long day before you get a divorce from me, Tommy Perrin."

He cut her short. "I'm coming out to the house tonight to pick up some things. If you don't want to be around, leave the key next door."

"Come ahead," she told him. "Come right ahead. I'll be here."

He felt awkward, walking up to the house, ringing the bell, waiting for her. As if he had cut something from his mind and by the action had made a stranger of himself. The feeling deepened when she opened the door and stood there, staring at him. "Mr. Perrin, I guess. Won't you come in?"

He brushed past her and walked into the front room of the flat. There was a chair he'd known, there were the familiar things he'd lived with for fifteen years. But also he sensed a hostility, as if a foreign thing was in the flat that snarled back at him for deserting it. "I'll only be a minute," he

told her. "I just want a few of my personal things."

"Did your lawyer tell you it was all right?"

He didn't answer her. He walked into their bedroom and over to the bureau and she followed him silently, watching every movement he made.

She stood it until he had taken a suitcase from the closet and begun emptying his bureau drawers into it. Then she said, "You don't think you're going to get away with this, do you, Tommy Perrin?"

"Get away with what?" he asked.

"Getting rid of me after fifteen years, that's what."

"That's just exactly what I'm going to do, though."

She backed up and started crying a little.

"Listen," he told her, "if you think this is any easier for me than it is for you, you're crazy. Why don't you go out in the kitchen and let me finish packing?"

"Don't you dare talk to me like that." She acted as if some part of her had been forgotten for many years, and she now felt driven to pull it from a cold, locked section of her mind. She stopped crying and held out her arms toward him. "What in the world's gotten into you, Tommy? What did I do?"

He stopped packing and swung around from the bureau, staring at her. This was his wife—but still it wasn't. It was someone strange, someone frightening, that he'd never known. He realized that you could live with a person for a long, long time and never really meet them. He wanted to leave the apartment and his new knowledge of her as quickly as he could. "It's no use going into it, Ag. It's finished as far as I'm concerned. Done," he said. The cold, clear air blew down from Buena Vista hill and through the open window of the bedroom.

She ran to the side of the bureau and grabbed his arm. "I won't let you. You understand me? I won't let you."

"You won't what? What's the matter

with you, Ag? Have you gone crazy?"

"I'm not crazy," she said. "I'm just not going to let you break up this marriage. I took you in when you asked me to and I'm not going to let you walk out of here like this." She took him by both arms and started to shake him. "I'll kill you first, Tommy Perrin. Do you hear me? I'll kill you."

He pulled her arms loose from him. "No, you won't," he said. "I won't let you." But Hyson's words repeated themselves in his mind. "Women do funny things when you kick them out." And he felt the fear rise in him.

"I mean it, Tommy. If you go through with this, it'll be the last thing you ever do. You know me well enough to believe me."

The small naggings and the endless little pressures began to take shape in Perrin's mind. He remembered all the dead, useless evenings when she'd told him, "Tommy, we're going to Marple's tonight," and he'd said, "Why don't you tell me these things? I had some work I wanted to do." And she'd pull the whole forgotten thing back into her eyes in one instant and whisper, "Tommy, I told you we were going to Marple's tonight. For heaven's sake, don't argue with me all the time."

He'd known the fear was there in him, holding him back, binding him to her. Everytime he'd said, "Oh, for Pete's sake, get your coat on, Ag. Let's go." And then she'd grab his arm and squeeze it and say, "Tommy boy, you're the only man in the world for me. Absolutely the only man in the whole world for me." But he'd forgotten it somehow, pushed it into some little corner where it had hidden for fifteen years, eating away at him one inch at a time.

He sensed that it was losing this that had broken her—having an endless series of tiny little cruelties snatched from her hands. He stepped back from her and watched her for a second. Then he said quietly, "Go to hell, Agnes," and turned

to the bureau to finish packing. He had his bag in his hand and was halfway down the long hallway of the flat leading to the door when she ran after him.

"I'm warning you, Tommy," she said. "If I can't do it myself, I'll get Nollie. Nollie isn't dead. You know Nollie isn't dead, don't you, Tommy?"

IT WAS out, finally. And he turned back with his hand on the doorknob; and his suitcase in his hand. The thing that had been between them for fifteen years was standing there in the hall with them, laughing and sneering. He felt then as if there had never been anything between them but hatred, growing and festering so it could latch onto the name of Nollie Hempton. "I told you, Ag," he said. "I told you it was done. You or Nollie or the police or all of you put together can't change it. It's done, Aggie. Finished. Dead as yesterday." He opened the door and hurried down the stairs and out into the cold night. It was very clear. When he opened his mouth and took in a lungful of air, it was as if he had never breathed before in his life.

At twelve o'clock noon two thousand people swarm out of the Russ Building on Montgomery street and scatter for lunch. Watching all of them is like looking at a moving picture stepped up so fast it blurs, but Perrin caught him in the corner of his eye just as he got to the drugstore on the corner of Sutter. At least he thought he caught him. He looked a little older, thicker, more intent in pushing his way through everybody—but still Nollie Hempton.

Perrin tried to get through the crowd to the side of the Russ Building so he could get a closer look at him but the crowd moved him along and he disappeared. He wondered briefly what Hempton would be doing on Montgomery street anyway. Then he shrugged his shoulders and walked into the building.

Hyson's office was on the eleventh floor, just to the right of the elevator and Perrin

caught him as he was putting on his hat and coat.

"How are you, Tommy? What's up?"

"Are you on your way to lunch?"

"Yes. Want to come along?"

"Fine." He followed Hyson to the elevator and they rode down together in silence. When they got out on the street, he said, "You were right, Joe. She's burned."

"So?"

"She threatened to kill me. What do you think I ought to do?"

The lawyer stopped in the middle of the street and stared at him for a moment. Then he said, "I don't know, Tommy. Tell me what happened. Maybe we can make sense out of it."

When Perrin got through, they were finishing their coffee. Hyson hadn't said anything. Now he said, "There's someone else looking for you, Tommy. He was in the office just before you got there. A big, heavy-set guy who wouldn't give me his name. He wanted to know where he could get hold of you in a hurry. I told him I didn't know."

Perrin didn't wonder any more. Nollie had brushed past him, had been looking for him. But when you live with a nightmare inside you for fifteen years, it's hard talking about it to someone. You try to get the words up and you have to kind of spit them out. It gets buried under a million efforts to push it out of your mind altogether. Perrin drank the rest of his coffee and reached for the check.

"You want to keep it to yourself, Tommy?"

"I think I'd better go now," Perrin said.

"Suit yourself."

He got all the way to the hatrack, fighting an impulse to run, when he stopped and turned back. Hyson was sitting there, drinking his coffee. Perrin walked back and sat down. "It was a kid's trick, Joe. Did you ever get into a jam when you were a kid?"

"Sure," Hyson said.

"I was waiting for the Telephone Company to put me on regular. My old man worked there. But in '35 they weren't hiring many people. The guy you saw this morning was probably Nollie Hempton. We used to live next door to each other in Hayes Valley, about a block from the Panhandle. Nollie was a tough guy. Little rackets, stealing cars. Stuff like that."

The whole picture eased back into his mind and he felt the way he'd felt the first time he told Agnes about it. "You remember how it was in the depression? No jobs? Hanging around day after day? Making a buck last a month? We were drinking beer one day in Golden Gate Park and Hempton asked me to hold up a store with him. I can't remember why I did. Kicks? Being a big shot? I don't know. I said okay. There was a little grocery store down by Waller and Webster and we got there just as the guy who owned it was closing up.

"**T**HREE

in there. His wife, I guess. When they asked us what we wanted, Nollie pulled a gun out and told them to stick up their hands. I went around in back of the counter and the woman started screaming. The old guy lost his head and began hitting me. While I was wrestling with him, Nollie shot him."

"What happened then?"

"I got sick. The old man had a grey coat sweater on that buttoned up, and I remember seeing the blood dripping down the front of it. His wife just kept screaming and Nollie and I ran out of there. We stopped in an alley somewhere, and he shoved the gun into my stomach. I thought he was going to kill me, too. He stood there swearing at me over and over again as if I'd made him do it. Then he said he'd murder me if I ever opened my mouth about it. I started to go to the cops a thousand times while the story was running in the papers but I never did. I used

to see Nollie around after that but pretty soon he moved to a different neighborhood and I never saw him again."

He stopped and looked directly at Hyson. "I remember going to bed with the fear and getting up in the morning with the fear and sitting down to dinner with it. After a little bit, I met my wife . . . Did you ever feel as if you had to tell someone something? That you'd go crazy if you kept it to yourself another minute?"

Hyson nodded.

"I told her about it after I'd been going with her for a while. She acted understanding. Maybe that was why I married her—I don't know. But after we were married, she began using it on me. And then she stopped talking about it but every time I felt like making a move, her eyes would light up and I knew she was holding it in her mind. The other day I figured to hell with it. I'd take a chance."

"You've got yourself a mess, Tommy."

"That's right."

"Where are you staying?"

"At a rooming house on Jones Street."

"Does she know you're there?"

"No."

"Why do you think Hempton wants you?"

"I don't know what she told him. Maybe enough to make him think I'm going to the cops. Maybe just enough to tease him." He grinned a little at Hyson. "Maybe he wants to talk over old times."

"You want to go to the police?"

Perrin shook his head.

"Why don't you go to Los Angeles for a week or so? I'll try to get in touch with your wife and Hempton."

"What good'll that do?"

Hyson shrugged. "Who knows? At least you'll be out of their range for a while."

Perrin shook his head again. "I can't see myself running to Los Angeles like a scared rabbit."

Hyson lit a cigarette and looked at him.

"You've got something to be scared about, Tommy."

"No. I feel as if I'd been running from the damn thing for fifteen years. Besides, I've got a job to think about. I'm going back to Jones street."

He decided to call her up the day after he'd talked with Hyson. When he got her on the phone, she sounded as if she'd been sitting beside it, patiently waiting for it to ring.

"Have you come to your senses yet, Tommy Perrin?"

"What did you tell him, Ag?"

"Tell him? Tell who? Tell who, Tommy darling?"

"You're way out on a limb, Agnes. What are you counting on so much? That I'm scared of you?"

"You scared of me? I'd never imagine such a thing. Who'd be frightened of me or Nollie Hempton?"

"What did you tell him?"

"Come on out, Tommy. Come on out and talk to me about it. I didn't tell him anything we can't straighten out again."

It slipped into his mind then and hung there. You get pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed. And then that's all. Then you start losing track of all the cold, common sense things you've built in your mind over a lifetime and all you think of is feeling someone's throat between your fingers. Just so they couldn't talk to you any more. Just so they'd be still and quiet, and far away and maybe leave, your mind forever.

She was still talking and his fingers kept tightening and untightening. The idea itched him, and whispered to him, and told him she had it coming. And it was the only way out for him. "That's not a bad idea," he said suddenly. "Maybe after all it isn't a bad idea at all. Are you going to be home tonight?"

"Tommy!"

She just said the one word but he could feel the familiarity of their life together

during some of the times when she hadn't run him ragged, during the days and hours and times when they had forgotten it and life had run from Monday to Sunday with the comfort of habit.

"You bet I'll be here. All night, Tommy."

And he could still rise to the memory of the known bed and the warmth of her body next to his.

"I'll expect you at nine."

And the itch came, slamming back into his mind on her last words, driving him with hatred of himself—because she was right, and Hyson was right. And he knew that with the fear, a cold, set anger had been building in him all the years. He opened his fingers, took a package of cigarettes from his pocket and picked one out and lit it. "Nine on the nose, Aggie," he said. "I'll see you."

IT WAS raining when he got to Waller street, a cold, blowing, gusty rain that swept in from the Pacific driven by a strong continuous wind. Perrin put his head down and walked against it. He felt strange again and a little excited as if he were coming back there from the Telephone Company after he'd been out on a late job and was about to walk into the flat, calling, "Hey, Ag. Fix me some coffee, will you? I'm frozen." He watched ahead of him and the lights were on in the flat and he could see her familiar shadow, broad and shapeless against the high green wall of the front room. He shook himself and the anger was there, hot and steady in him. He walked a little faster.

When he rang the bell, he had to wait. Then he heard the familiar buzz of the release and he pushed his shoulder against the door and shoved. The hydraulic lever that swung the door to had been stuck for months and he remembered promising Agnes he'd fix it one of these days. Then he was inside at the bottom of the stairs looking up at her.

"Tommy, come on up. You must be drowned."

It was as if nothing had happened except that something had gotten into her voice. She'd pitched it nearly twice as high as he could ever remember hearing it.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks, Ag." He shook his hat and coat and walked up the stairs. She began talking rapidly when he was halfway up.

"Come on into the front room, Tommy. Come on in and sit down. Here, here. Let me take your things. Good night!" She grabbed his hat and coat from him and began shaking them. "Go on," she said. "Go on in the front room. I'll get you some coffee and be right in." She raised her voice even higher. "Go on in, will you, Tommy? Go on in, will you?"

He wondered if she were really going crazy. But then he sensed it himself. You remember when you were a kid playing games with your brother and you used to walk into a room and freeze because you knew he always hid behind a certain door? Only now it was late at night and you weren't exactly sure if he was there or not except that it felt as if he were there? And you'd start to pray that something would happen to break the suspense—that he would leap out and grab you, or that whatever was in the room would scream, or smash something. Anything to shatter that frozen moment when you didn't know.

"What's the matter with you, Agnes? What are you scared about?"

"Scared? Scared? Why' should I be scared? Go on in the front room, will you? I'll get the coffee." She hurried down the back hall into the kitchen and he let her go. Then he turned and walked on into the front room.

It was exactly the same. Each thing was in its place. Two three-way lamps lighted up the green walls and the dark, heavy drapes on the front windows. The thermostatic control on the gas heater sputtered and went out. He felt a sudden impulse to

race furiously around the room, peering under cushions, pushing things aside, lifting things to uncover what was there. She came back in from the kitchen then, carrying the coffee, and still talking.

"I've got bad news for you," she said. "Real bad." She set the coffee down on the high end table by the gas heater. "I talked to Nollie this afternoon and I couldn't do anything with him. He sounded like a crazy man. He just kept talking to me a mile a minute, asking where you were, telling me he wanted you."

She gave it away then. Talking and looking past him at one corner of the room after another. He knew Nollie was there, watching and waiting, keeping track of how well she'd memorized her lines and waiting for something he was supposed to say. He forced himself to listen to her. "What did you tell him, Agnes?"

"I told him he should look you up and stop you from divorcing me."

"What did he say?"

"He started laughing at me. It drove me frantic and I told him I'd go to the police with the whole story if he didn't see you."

He was going over the room and the flat very carefully in his mind, inch by inch, corner by corner, trying to figure where Hempton would be hiding. "And he didn't go for it. Is that what you're trying to say, Agnes?"

She blinked her eyes rapidly like a little kid who hasn't learned how to lie quickly and expertly. And she leaned forward in the chair. "You want to come back, don't you, Tommy? You've decided you made a mistake, haven't you? You still love me, huh, Tommy?"

And into his anger crept a contempt for her. He said, "No. On all three counts. One after the other."

SHE swallowed the coffee and jumped up. "I've got some more on the stove, Tommy. It'll only be a minute. You stay right there."

He watched her get up from the chair and leave the room and as she left, she turned back as if to memorize where he was sitting, the position of his body in the chair, and its relationship to the doorway. Then she hurried quickly out and he heard her quick, hasty footsteps patter down the back hallway toward the kitchen.

Maybe when you're going to kill someone you feel like this, maybe in back of the hatred that drives you against someone there is only fear, a terrible nameless fear that lifts you from a chair and starts you moving toward a doorway, forgetful of everything but the something or someone that stands in the way of your breathing, and talking, and laughing, and saying, "Hey, what's with you?" to the people you know that walk by you every morning on their way to work.

He got up from the chair and moved through the doorway, walking quietly and unsteadily down the hallway after her. The hall turned just before it reached the kitchen, a sharp right-angled break that closed off the front of the flat from the rear. A cedar chest stood on the other side of the right-angle with a telephone shelf over it. She'd evidently stopped there on her way back from the kitchen because when he made the turn, she screamed, "Forgive me, Tommy," and began pulling the trigger on a pistol she held out in her right hand.

It upset his whole world. When the bullet hit him in the shoulder and tore through the skin and flesh, he remembered thinking foolishly, *She shouldn't be doing this. I should be doing this. Nothing in this play's going right.*

Then the shock passed and he leaped at her, hitting her in the face as hard as he could while she kept pulling the trigger. She kind of leaned forward toward him as if she wanted to tell him something she'd forgotten, and then she continued falling down to the floor. He remembered knocking a guy out once in a fist fight down in the school gym and that seemed real. But

when someone you've lived with for fifteen years, slept beside, eaten breakfast and dinner and supper with, shoots a bullet into your shoulder and you feel your fist tearing into her cheek and jaw until she falls forward in the same way, it's like in a book or the movies. Only this was in his own home, a step away from his own kitchen. Perrin walked past her and leaned against the wall, sick and shaking.

It was very still in the flat then. He could hear the rain beating down in the alley and sweeping against the back porch. It seemed to him that it had been raining for a long, long time. He leaned there, fighting the pain in his shoulder and trying to remember where he was and what was happening. He fought his way up out of it like a person waking from a heavy sleep.

Agnes began to stir on the floor. She moaned a little. She passed her hand wonderingly over her face, drawing back from the hurt. Perrin reached down and pulled the gun from her hand. As he took it, she opened her eyes and acted as if she were trying to point somewhere or say something. And then he heard the floorboard in the bedroom that connected with the front room give and caught the solid footstep that sounded after it. And then again there wasn't any sound. He took his hand from his shoulder and half ran down the hallway, and ducked into the rear bedroom. He stood there, listening.

Then he heard the sliding doors connecting the front room and the bedroom roll open. He waited. He heard 'lie's voice whispering, "Mrs. Perrin?" A little louder. "Mrs. Perrin?" Johnny peered around the edge of the door. She was sitting up on the floor, staring straight ahead of her, saying nothing. "Mrs. Perrin!" Hempton raised his voice and yelled. Tommy lifted the gun and fumbled around till he found the catch that released the magazine. It slipped out in his hand and he looked at the two greasy bits of lead fitted into the small dull copper casings. He

pushed the magazine back into the grip of the gun and stood there.

Hempton was standing in the doorway of the front room and his shadow spread itself on the wall opposite in the dim light from the overhead hall lamp. Perrin waited another moment or two and then said, "Do you want her or me, Nollie?"

Something sharpens the senses in a time of danger, cuts back through the pounded, flattened, painful memories until it reaches the hurt and the situation you need to know. It seemed to Tommy that the years when Hempton had been forgotten suddenly left his mind and he felt again the sick stab of terror and the terrible feeling of being alone and hunted in a city.

Hempton didn't answer him.

In the silence Tommy reached out and flipped the wall switch to the hall light.

"Watch out for him, watch out for him, Tommy." Her voice was very low and she mumbled the words a little but he heard her. It seemed much clearer to him then. He could imagine Nollie turning on her when he'd found out she knew, and he could feel for her and the twisted frightening trap she'd found herself in. His anger drained from him, leaving in its place a puzzled curiousness that knew you never knew anyone completely, even yourself. "You'd better start down this way, Agnes." He spoke very distinctly and it seemed to him that the words clattered even in the heavily carpeted hall. She waited a second and then he could hear the soft, carpet-muffled drag of her body as she edged toward the kitchen.

THREE was a sudden movement at the other end of the hall and Perrin tightened his fingers on his own gun. Hempton must have reached the table at the head of the stairs, giving him room to shoot against the right-angled pitch of the hallway.

Nollie began firing at Agnes after she'd come about halfway down the hall. He had some kind of silencer on his gun and

the shots sounded like a wet windowshade slapping in the rain. She began screaming when she heard the shots but he didn't hit her until he had fired four times. The fourth shot cut off her screams all at once. Perrin listened but she didn't move any more. All he heard was Hempton's sudden rush for the safety of the front room.

And then as he made up his mind to start down the darkened hall after Hempton, he heard her whisper, "He made me. He made me. I didn't want to, Tommy. Not really." She sounded very, very tired, as if there wasn't anymore she could do about anything.

He slipped out into the dark hallway and began moving down it, hugging the opposite wall, feeling a small comfort in the knowledge that he knew the hall and the house and Hempton didn't.

Hempton kept very silent, waiting for him.

When Tommy reached the telephone shelf, he felt his way along it until his foot touched the cedar chest. Slowly he lifted one foot and placed it on the top of the chest. There was no sound so he heaved himself up and moved out toward the corner of the right-angled wall. When he reached the corner, he took a handkerchief from his pocket and a book of matches. He scratched a match, set fire to the handkerchief, and tossed it out toward the head of the stairs.

Hempton fired at the handkerchief the moment he saw it. Tommy watched the small blue flame of the shot and aimed to the right and above it. "You have to have luck. Once in a while, Tommy Perrin, you've got to have it." He shot two times and heard one of the bullets splinter against the window casing at the front of the hall. But he didn't hear the other one at all. All he heard was Hempton gasping as if he suddenly couldn't get his breath. And he knew he'd hit him.

He leaped down from the chest and fumbled on the wall near the stairs for the

second switch to the hall light. When he'd found it, he hesitated, snapped it on, crouched, and ran toward the door to the front room. But there was no need to run.

Hempton was sitting on the floor with his hands folded across his stomach, staring straight ahead of him, and just as Tommy reached him, he began leaning to the left. Then he fell over all at once. . . .

"What can I promise you, Tommy?"

(Continued on page 113)



I told my beautiful wife: "All right, I'll get you your divorce, but I'm not doing it for you, or for your racket boy-friend. I'm doing it for me, so thanks for letting me get off the bus."

Exit lines. Big stuff. Bigger lies. I walked out wishing I were dead. And that wish was almost to come true too soon.

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MAGAZINE

LADY IN HADES

By V. E. THIESSEN



He couldn't turn her in.
He knew that now.

Could this really be Evie, his lovely, too-perfect Evie—this frightened, desperate woman begging him to save her from the chair?

THERE are nights when the scream of the sirens never shatter the quiet, and there are nights when the sirens go all night, somewhere in the city. And then again there are those nights—and look out for them!—that start quietly, perhaps with a game of chess.

Johnny Williams pounced gleefully down the diagonal with his bishop, then patted the speed graphic that lay beside him. "I

oughtta get a picture of this. I'm going to beat you this time."

Harney studied the board. He was a man without haste, without emotion. He moved a knight gently and said, "No, Johnny. Not tonight. Because you'll never have a chance to make the move you need. You're in check now, and I'll checkmate you in ten." Harney sounded as sure as Fate, as sure as a Homicide cop should.

The simple defensive move of the knight had opened the file of his rook, and discovered a check against Johnny's king.

After that the game lasted just ten moves. Ten moves of beautiful, cold, implacable chess.

Johnny said, "I needed only one move, and you never let me make it. You never let up, do you, Harney?"

Harney's voice was a cold wind, and they both knew he was talking of more than chess. "You never crowd a man until you're ready, and then you never let him rest until it's finished."

Johnny shuddered. "I'm glad you're not after me, Harney."

Harney said, "We're on the same side, kid. How about a drink?"

"No drink. I'm on the wagon." Johnny felt anger rising in him. Harney knew that. What did he think he was doing?

"Yeah," Harney said. "I forgot."

Johnny said, "I don't get it, but like hell you forgot. You know what would happen if I took one drink. I'd go on and on and on. You know how it was before. Like hell you forgot that."

"Sure, Johnny. Sure." Harney was playing with the black queen. "Funny thing how that happens with some people. Take yourself, you probably never had a drink in college."

"Sure I did," Johnny said. "I was all right then."

"I see. You didn't become an alcoholic until after you married?"

Hotly, blindly, Johnny shot the words out. "Damn you! Leave a man alone."

"Sorry," Harney said. "But you see what I mean. You crowd a man, and you probe him where he's soft, and pretty soon he will tell you what you want to know."

Johnny didn't answer that. He saw, all right. But he hadn't told Harney some things. He hadn't told anyone. How can you tell someone that your wife is too perfect? How can you explain that she drove you to drink because she did nothing, abso-

lutely nothing that was wrong? How can you explain that mistakes, and passion, and quarrels, and loving beyond reason are a part of life, and that a too controlled emotion is worse than no emotion at all. And when you become a lush, when life and liquor have both whipped you for a time, how can you explain that since the divorce there's a part of you gone, so that nothing has changed and you're still afraid. If you take one drink you might go on and on. Johnny licked his lips. It had been six months since that last drink.

Harney was pouring scotch into a silver glass. The telephone rang and he answered it. A voice squawked in his ear, loud enough that Johnny could hear, though he could not catch the words.

Harney said, "Yeah, he's here. Okay. 1713 Elmwood. We'll be right there." He put the phone down with one hand and the drink with the other. He looked at the drink and said, "Hell," without emotion. Then he turned to Johnny and said, "Get your camera, kid. Jerry Bristow's been killed."

"Jerry Bristow?"

"Yeah. Young Man Oil himself. And not at home. They found him in a swell apartment at 1713 Elmwood. Looks like a love nest killing. Got plenty film?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. He checked his camera, and followed Harney out to the homicide car at the curb. The siren screamed through the night, but the noise didn't worry Johnny—yet.

WHEN they came into Jerry Bristow's love nest, Johnny could scarcely suppress a whistle of admiration. Then the faint scent of perfume reached him, and that suddenly made him clench down on the leather strap that held his camera. Somebody used the same perfume as Evie had. The scent took him back to the past.

In all the exquisitely furnished room there was only one thing out of place. The young oil millionaire, Jerry Bristow, lay

face up, staring at the ceiling with sightless eyes. He was fully dressed, in slacks, sport shirt, and sport shoes that must have cost two weeks of Johnny's salary. Even the color of the lipstick on his collar and face where a woman had kissed him was in harmony with his dark brown slacks. The only thing he wore that was not in good taste was a nylon stocking, twisted and tied around his neck.

Harney studied the body. "Strangled, all right," he said, "but it doesn't look like he put up a fight. Better have the doc check for anything that might have knocked him out first, a blow on the head, knockout drops, anything. Get a picture, Johnny."

Johnny shot a picture. He followed Harney into a bedroom, watched him look through closets and dresser drawers. Harney said, "He hadn't been here long, or else he'd changed his girl. This stuff all looks new."

He pulled negligees out of the drawer, expensive, filmy things that had cost a small fortune. "Initialed, too," Harney said. "It must be hell to have money." He pointed at the initials, *E. L.*, which were worked delicately into every piece of lingerie.

Johnny began to feel himself go taut. *E. L.*. There must be hundreds of good-looking girls who had those initials. There was no reason to believe . . .

But his mind kept circling back. Evelyn Love. That had been his wife's name before they were married. Now, after the divorce, she was using it again.

One of Harney's men came into the room and said, "I got the information you wanted about his will."

"Okay. Let's have it."

"His wife, Greta, gets almost everything. A few charities get a bit, and his partner, Malcolm Sims, gets a chunk of the business."

Harney looked up keenly. "A chunk of the business. How's that?"

"Bristow Oil had several subsidiaries. One of them was a company that handled

nothing but diesel oil. Seems they bought oil from Bristow at cost, retailed and wholesaled to a lot of industrial users. That way the profit showed in the subsidiary company instead of Bristow Oil itself. I don't exactly understand it, but the reasons had something to do with taxes and corporation laws."

"And his partner inherits this? What is his name?"

"Malcolm Sims. Yeah, he gets the whole subsidiary company."

"Okay. That makes him a possible suspect. What about Bristow's wife?"

The officer consulted his notebook. "They were married four years ago. No children. Didn't get on too well, didn't get on too badly. She used to work in a little theater group before they married. That's how he met her. She was directing some sort of show that they tried to get him to angel. He didn't put up any dough, but he did marry Greta a few months later. Surprised everyone, for she'd been going with the leading actor. But everyone says Jerry Bristow was a man to get what he wanted."

"Yeah," Harney said, "but I don't guess he wanted that." He gestured toward the stocking around the corpse's neck. "Anything on the girl who was living here?"

"No, not much. We're looking for the building janitor. He helped move Bristow in. The apartment manager says he rented the apartment just a few days ago. There were two apartments vacant. This was the best."

"Okay." Harney turned back to the dresser. "Get some pictures of this lingerie, Johnny," he said. "Also get one of those cosmetics. It may help to check that later on. Maybe we can trace them."

Johnny shot the lingerie. Then he shot the cosmetics. They were good cosmetics, Evelyn's brand. He had the sense of fate rushing onward, of something impossible, yet inevitable. He thought wildly, *What's life done to us, Evie? What's life done?*

Harney probed the room, without haste,

analyzing what he found, talking to himself as much as to the men that were performing the routine work of investigation. Then he returned to the living room.

The fingerprint man reported, "Several sets of fingerprints. At least one looks like a woman's."

"Okay," Harney said. "But we've first got to find her."

The man who had reported on the will came back into the room. He said, "We found the janitor. He got one look at the woman who came here with Bristow this afternoon. Says she was dark haired, about five feet six, slender. She wore a green suit and alligator shoes. He remembers the shoes especially because she stepped in a mud puddle. That amused him. He's a bitter sort of a guy."

Harney said, "I'll talk to him later. Alligator shoes, huh?"

The fingerprint man said, "There's an alligator bag under the sofa. I hadn't got to it yet."

"Get a stick and pull it out," Harney ordered. "Wait a minute. Johnny, get a picture first."

Johnny got down and focused on the bag. It had been kicked just under the edge. He felt the blood leave his face as he focused the camera and shot.

He couldn't keep his feelings out of his face. As he got up Harney asked, "What's the matter, Johnny? You recognize that bag?"

There wasn't any use to lie. There was probably everything inside, driver's license, a dozen identifications.

He said tonelessly, "It's Evelyn's. My ex-wife's. I gave it to her for a birthday present."

After the prints were taken Harney opened the bag. He looked at the things inside, and then back to Johnny. Johnny braced himself. Now it would start. Now the horrible probing, the dragging up of things that should stay dead. *Evie, Evie, what's happened to us?*

Harney said, "Okay, we're through here," and relief flooded over Johnny for an instant. And then he thought, and he didn't feel so good. Harney hadn't overlooked anything. He remembered Harney's words at the chess board.

Harney wasn't ready yet.

AFTERWARD, Johnny went home. Even after they returned to the station Harney had asked no questions, but had withdrawn within his mind and hidden his thoughts behind an emotionless face.

Since his divorce Johnny had moved into a shabby but clean two-room apartment somewhat closer to his work. He came in, switched on the light. Before he could get the speed graphic slung off his shoulder, a woman got up from the studio couch and ran to him. She grabbed him and she was shaking, and crying, and clinging like a child.

"Johnny. Oh, Johnny! You've got to help me. You've got to."

One part of him, the hurt part, wanted to say, *It's all over, Evelyn. Don't ask me for help. The decree says it is all over.* The other part of him was glad, glad to be holding her this way, glad of whatever had driven her to him.

That part of him answered, "Sure, Evie, sure. What is it?"

"Murder. The police. Hide me, Johnny. You have to hide me."

"You killed Jerry Bristow?"

"They'll never believe I didn't. I haven't got a chance, Johnny. I haven't got a chance!"

He had never seen her like this. Never seen her with her self-confidence shaken, never felt her with her body crying against his, never felt her needing him—needing anything, for that matter.

He said, "All right, honey. I'll help. Let me get you a drink."

He poured them both a drink, scotch and water, and he almost took a sip of his before he remembered why the bottle was

there—the bottle that was the proof of his will power. Then he set the glass down, untasted, and asked, "Did anyone see you come here?"

"I don't think so." She was quieter now, but her eyes were still frightened.

"Then we have time to plan. You'd better use your own name, so it won't look like you're hiding in case they find you. Maybe you'd better stay in town. Better stay away from hotels and tourist courts. They'll check those first." He looked at her. "It's crazy, but there's only one place. They've already checked it: it's the last place they'll check again."

"Where is it?"

"The apartment building where Bristow was killed. There was a vacancy."

She began shaking again. "I can't go there. I simply can't! Even if I could I can't afford it."

He said, "Together we can pay for a couple of weeks. Get your hat."

She was still staring at him with frightened eyes when the phone rang.

It was Harney. He said, "Johnny, what's the address where your ex-wife lives?"

Johnny gave him the address.

"Thanks. We've got a pick-up out for her, and thought you could save us a little time. If you see her anywhere, give us a call, will you?"

"Sure," Johnny said. "Sure."

His mind was racing. Was he a rat in a trap? Had Harney guessed that she had come here? Had Harney put a man outside, watching?

He said, "Out the back. Out into the little courtyard there and over the fence. You may ruin your hose, but that's the way we go, and now."

THEY went out and circled around to pick up Johnny's car, where he had parked it on a side street. They were in the car, easing forward, when Johnny spotted a policeman, a quiet man in plain clothes who stood watching the entrance to

the apartment just a little too casually.

So Harney had been thinking. He had put a tail on Johnny, just in case. The man looked up, recognized Johnny, saw the woman beside him and moved toward the car at the curb, not running, not knowing that Johnny had spotted him.

Johnny fed the gas to the car. He took eight turns and twists before he was sure he was not followed, and had shaken the man. Then he began to trace a complex course toward the murdered man's apartment.

He said, "Okay, honey, give me a few facts. What were you doing in that apartment?"

"I came with Jerry."

He felt his hands growing tight on the wheel. "Jerry rented that apartment for you? Is that right? That lingerie with E. L. on it. He bought it for you? That's why you're so scared?"

"Yes." Her lips were stiff, white.

"You knew he was married?"

"Yes."

He thought, *I ought to let them have her. I ought to turn this jalopy around and take her to the station.*

And then he heard the siren, and his heart jumped into his throat. The cars ahead of him all pulled over. His were the only lights moving in the dark street. He pulled over, trying to hide between two cars.

An ambulance went by, red light flashing. Traffic resumed. Johnny sat for a moment, the sweat breaking on his forehead. He couldn't turn her in. He knew that now.

She said, "I want to tell you, Johnny." Then she started again, clutching at his arm. "I didn't stay there, Johnny. At least, I hadn't yet."

That made him glance at her.

She said, "I went out with him several times before I knew he was married. I liked him, liked him a lot. Then when I found out he was married it didn't matter, so much. He kept after me to let him fix me

up a place. This afternoon he took me there. He had everything—initialed lingerie—well, you saw it. I told him I'd like to think it over. He gave me his car keys, told me to drive around the block and think it over and when I came back he'd have a drink waiting. When I got back he was—" She put her hands over her face. "I didn't know what to do. I just ran. I left my purse and everything and just ran."

"How long did you drive around?"

"I don't know. Twenty or thirty minutes."

Johnny said, looking straight ahead, "And if he'd been alive—what would you have told him?"

"I don't know. . . . It's been so lonely since we broke up. Lonely and bleak and I haven't cared much about anything."

He said, "Forget it. The manager here doesn't know you, but the janitor saw you. That right?"

"Okay. If you can get to see the manager without running into a cop you'll be all right. If you get in, stay there, have groceries brought in. Tell them you're writing a book. Use your married name, Evelyn Williams. I'll park down the street a block. If you or the police don't come out in half an hour I'll know you made it okay."

He let her out and watched her as she walked away. From the back this way, she still looked good. He wondered, as she disappeared into the building, what would have happened to them both if Jerry Bristow had lived.

Of course, she hadn't actually moved in. But she had almost decided it was all right. Was that as bad as the act itself? And was that any worse than giving in to whiskey, the way he had done? He didn't know! Yet he didn't like any part of her relations with Bristow. He grinned wryly, and thought, *This is a hell of a time for me to get jealous.*

A half hour later she had not come out. He turned the car quietly and drove on. A mile away he stopped at a drugstore for

a cup of coffee and looked at the telephone book.

Bristow's partner, Malcolm Sims, lived out at Crest Heights, one of the better residential districts. Johnny finished his coffee and went back to his car.

SIMS' house was a big dark brick structure of English architecture. Johnny walked up a curving concrete walk and rang the bell. A man answered.

Johnny said, "Mr. Sims?"

"Yes."

"Police business. I want to talk to you about your partner's death. You've heard?"

"Yes. It was on the nine o'clock local news broadcast. Did they get the woman?"

"Not yet." Johnny looked at him keenly. "Did you know her?"

"Me? Heavens, no! Didn't even know he was playing around. Don't see why he did. His wife's quite a dish herself."

"You know her well?"

"Not well. Met her after their marriage. A good-looking woman."

"You know of the terms of Bristow's will?"

"I was to get the diesel oil business," he said. "I don't know if Jerry actually wrote his will that way."

"He did," Johnny assured him. "The business is worth money, I understand, real money."

Sims said, smiling, "Enough to be a motive for murder, is that it? Might be, except for one thing. The entire business depended upon Bristow."

"How do you mean?"

"He had control of Bristow Oil. If he was willing to sell diesel at manufacturing cost we had a business here. If he wasn't, he could sell it somewhere else, and I had no business. Unless Mrs. Bristow elects to continue as Jerry did, I have no business now." He spread his hand expansively. "Oh, perhaps I do. Perhaps I could sell the name and good will and a list of customers to another oil company for a fraction

of its worth. But actually, I had every reason to want Jerry Bristow alive!"

Somewhere in the distance a telephone rang. Sims said, "Excuse me," and went off to soothe it. Johnny could hear his voice, lifted an instant in surprise. "Yes, he's already here. Yes. Just a moment ago." Then there was no sound for a time, then Sims said, "Yes, I understand. I'll do what you suggest. I understand."

He came back into the room. He said, "Can I pour you a drink, Lieutenant? Or is it Lieutenant?"

"Not even Sergeant," Johnny said. "Just plain Johnny is me. Johnny Williams." He could see the faint stiffening of the other man, and his suspicions were verified. That had been Harney, saying the police were coming to see Sims. Harney had figured out that his own man couldn't have gotten there already and had asked Sims to stall, to keep Johnny there a few moments.

Johnny got up. He had to get out fast, fast and smoothly. He said, "Thanks, Mr. Sims, I'll call you later if there's anything else."

"Don't you have more questions? Don't you want to know where I was earlier this evening?"

Just one question, Johnny asked. "Why do you look so strange now? Do you think you're looking at a murderer?" He put one hand behind him and opened the door, as he finished his sentence. "Or do you see the murderer when you shave?"

Johnny slid out, closed the door and ran for his car. He saw the police car coming, silently, without sirens, and thanked his luck for the night as he drove away, taking four turns in succession, just in case.

He made one stop after that, a call to the manager of the apartments where Evie had gone. He learned that she had taken the apartment, and got her telephone extension. It was after midnight, but he had them ring her anyway.

She answered almost immediately. He said softly, "It's Johnny. I'm working on

things for you. Better get some sleep." "I can't sleep."

"Don't worry, honey. I'll be able to prove who killed him by morning." The lie came out smoothly, soothingly. "I'll call you the moment it's finished, and we'll have coffee together in the morning. Now get some sleep."

"All right." She was strangely meek, willing to be ordered. "I've been thinking, Johnny."

"About what?"

"About something I never understood. It's pretty easy to stand on a cliff and sneer at the people down below, isn't it? But then one day the ground crumbles back a little, and you fall yourself. I understand that now."

Johnny said, "Get some sleep, Evie," and hung up the phone.

He didn't know whether to cry or be happy. He remembered her clinging to him, her fear. He thought of what she had just said. She would never be the same now. She'd learned enough to be a woman now. The next man she loved wouldn't need to drink.

He got back in his car, and gunned it out to Jerry Bristow's house. He wanted to talk to Mrs. Bristow, and he had to beat the police there. He had a hunch they'd phoned there too, so she'd be expecting them.

BRISTOW'S house was even more pretentious than Sims', though in a different way. The place sprawled over an acre of ground, and as near as Johnny could tell from the street lights, it had a four-car garage and a swimming pool off to one side. He pressed the doorbell.

The woman who opened the door was, as Sims had put it, "quite a dish." She had apparently been expecting someone, for the door opened almost immediately. She was wrapped in a silk quilted housecoat. Her eyes were red as though she had been crying.

Johnny said, "I'm Johnny Williams, police department."

"Yes."

"I know you feel bad about your husband's death. But you must help us find his killer. Just a few questions, please?"

"Come in." She gave him a brave smile.

"You knew your husband had this other apartment?"

"No. I suspected he was—well, interested in someone else. But I didn't know it had gone so far." She dabbed at her eyes with an embroidered handkerchief.

"You have any idea who the other woman was?"

"None."

"You know that you and Malcolm Sims are the principal heirs? Do you know Sims?"

"Well, not very well. I met him a long time ago, when I was in little theater work."

"Had he any reason to kill your husband?"

"None that I know of. They always got on well."

Something was bothering Johnny, something that he should know, and yet couldn't remember. Then it clicked into place.

Either Sims or Mrs. Bristow was lying. Sims said they had met after her marriage. She had put the meeting a long time ago. Why should one of them lie?

He had to find out, and quickly, for he could expect Harney or his men to arrive any moment now.

He said, "So you met Mr. Sims in little theater work? I seem to remember something about him. He was an actor, wasn't he?"

"I think so. Perhaps that's where I met him. I really don't remember the exact occasion."

Johnny's thoughts raced. She was being casual, too casual. He remembered that she had been rumored to be in love with an actor just before she married Bristow.

What if Sims were that man? What if

she still loved Sims, and had only married Bristow for money? Could that be why Jerry Bristow had gone hunting other girls? The idea made a lot of sense. And if that were true, maybe Johnny knew what had happened.

The door creaked, and Johnny almost raced for it, thinking that Harney was here, wanting to pick him up. Then he remembered he had heard no squad car. He must be getting jumpy.

He turned toward Mrs. Bristow, his eyes hard and accusing. He said, "All right, you might as well know the truth. Sims has confessed the murder. Of course he blames most of it on you."

"On me?"

"On you. We've traced your history, clear back to the days you were in the little theater group. You and Sims were in love then. We have witnesses who saw you enter the apartment before the murder. We caught Sims in a dozen lies. He broke down and told us how you'd planned it all."

FOR a moment Johnny thought she wasn't going to break. Then she did, and her voice was a shrewish scream. "The liar! The dirty liar! It wasn't planned at all."

"All right," Johnny said, "it wasn't planned. But he's scared and he'll pin it on you if he can. How did it really happen?"

Mrs. Bristow's voice was still shrill. Her explanation came out in a torrent of words. "We went there for pictures of Jerry's new love nest. We were going to find Jerry and his new girl, offer to discuss things like sensible people. We were going to drop chloral hydrate in their drinks, just knock them out. Then we were going to get some pictures, the kind that would get me a big divorce settlement. But the girl wasn't there when we arrived. She was due any minute, so we slipped Jerry his drink and waited. But she didn't come, and didn't come, and finally Jerry passed out."

Johnny said, "And then you got the idea, huh? Why not kill him and let the girl take the blame? Why not have all his money, and each other, and let your rival pay for his murder? Is that it?"

She said dully, "We must have been mad!"

The door opened gently. Harney said, "Murderers are often a bit mad. I'll have to take you in, Mrs. Bristow."

Johnny said, "Then it was you I heard when the door creaked! You parked the car and sneaked up here."

Harney said, "Sure, Johnny. I knew you had to come here next. It was a part of the pattern. Just like you had to try to save the girl you still love."

Johnny said, "And you had to listen, didn't you, Harney? You wouldn't bust in without listening first. You wouldn't close in till you were ready. I hoped I could count on that."

Harney grinned. "Getting smart, Johnny. But how did you know we had Sims? How did you know we trapped him like you told Mrs. Bristow?"

Johnny gulped, "I didn't. I just bluffed."

Harney said, "You needn't have worried so much, kid. I knew there was something phony as soon as I saw them embroidered nightgowns. Not a one of them had been slept in . . ." His voice trailed off, embarrassed.

Johnny said suddenly, "Good-by, Harney."

He reached Evie's apartment at two o'clock in the morning. When she came to the door she was rubbing sleepy eyes.

He said, "It's all right, Evie. Everything's all right."

She said sleepily, "I knew it would be, after you phoned. How about some coffee, or a drink?" She stopped suddenly, waking suddenly with the enormity of what she had said.

He came in and shut the door. His eyes hard, he said, "Scotch and soda."

"Yes, Johnny." She began to babble. "I had some scotch brought in when I first got here and couldn't sleep. Lucky, aren't we?" She handed him his drink, and her hand was shaking.

He tasted it slowly, looking at her, savoring the taste. It tasted fine, but he didn't really need it. He wouldn't ever need a drink, really. He put down the rest of the drink and grinned. He felt wonderful.

He said, "I'm of the opinion you've grown up, Evie. I always did think you were a pretty nice gal. If I go home now, and don't finish this drink, will you go to breakfast with me about ten?"

"If you like. Or we could have breakfast here."

He grinned. It was like the old days when everything was all right. He said, "I'll be here at ten. Good night."

She said, "Johnny, you're slipping."

"What do you mean?"

"Long ago, before we were married, you used to kiss your date good night." She came up against him and lifted her lips.

After that he backed out the door. He thought, *Johnny, you chump, it's starting all over again.* Yet her kiss still burned on his lips. He took the steps two at a time, thinking, *But one thing won't start again. The drinking. Why would I need a drink now, or ever again? Evie's become a woman.*

• • •

— ONE MAN'S PULLMAN —

A Chicago trolley stopped in the middle of the night and took aboard a man nattily attired in pajamas, bathrobe and slippers. The motorman took the fare, saw him to a seat and kept his eye peeled for a cop. The passenger awakened in the police station and explained he often walked in his sleep but this was the first time he'd ever gone on a trolley ride.

H. H.



Sailor Willie was due for a storm—just as soon as his bride-to-be learned that his honeymoon apartment came complete with a well-built redhead and a built-in corpse!

DYING ROOM ONLY

By
**JOHN
BENDER**

IN ALL the time that I know Willie O'Malley, the young fellow they assign to me as assistant radio operator aboard the *Joseph Grant*, I am of the opinion that he is a pretty right sort of guy. You do not have to tell him everything twice; his voice on the mike is clear; he has a snappy hand on the telegraph key. He's a handsome

young fellow—almost as big as myself—and his good looks worry me for a while, but after we pal it ashore in some of the island ports, I relax. O'Malley is okay. He's ready with his buck on the bar, he holds his liquor good—and he don't let the sweet-meats get near him.

This is something I like in particular,

because a young guy fooling around with sweetmeats all the time is just asking for trouble, and I can tell you all about that. I'm still paying alimony to two different redheads.

But that is another story. The thing I want to tell you about is O'Malley, and the time he almost lands me on a cold slab in the morgue.

Like I say, I'm figuring that I have finally drawn a sensible character to help me out in the *Grant's* radio room, when whammo, O'Malley gives me the business.

We have just got back to the States from a three-week run down to the islands and are hoisting a few in the *Seaman's Salute*, which is the only bar where my word is as good as Uncle Sam's green stuff and I can promote a drink without hocking my hat. Maybe you think paying off two redheads is cheap. Just try it some time.

"Mac," O'Malley says over his drink, "would you do me a favor?"

"Anything, kid. Anything but money."

"Would you be my best man?"

"Sure, kid. Glad to do—" Then I choke, and it ain't the whiskey. "Your best man!"

"Yes," O'Malley says. "I'm getting married."

When I get over the shock, there is O'Malley sitting there, a silly grin on his kisser like he owns the world.

I have heard him right, then.

He is very grateful to me, O'Malley says, and so is this sweetmeat of his, someone who goes by the name of Helen Henschlager. O'Malley says he has written her all about me, and they are both happy I show him so much about being a good radio operator and keep him out of trouble with other sweetmeats away from home.

"It is Helen's idea you be our best man, Mac," O'Malley tells me. "She writes me this in her last letter I get in Havana. Whaddya say, Mac?"

I say it. "You are making a mistake."

But he just grins that big, happy-go-lucky Irish grin and tells me I got to do him

and Helen this favor or the marriage don't get off on the right foot, so to speak. "You only got to see Helen one time and you'll know she ain't like any of those women you warn me against. Why, Helen, she's—well, Mac, she's just wonderful!"

So is dynamite, till you fool around with it.

I down my drink and order another round and try to figure what's the best tack to get this kid back into safe water.

"Look," I say finally, "it ain't just the sweetmeats that are liable to give a man a hard time. It's them in-laws." I shake my head. "They're the killers. Now this here Helen's folks are probably sitting up nights thinking what kind of hell they can make for you. Ever consider that, O'Malley?"

"Uh-uh. No trouble there, Mac. Helen's an orphan. She lives at the Y uptown, near where she works." Then O'Malley shows me a key. "I figure we're pretty lucky. Before I ship out I manage to find this brand-new apartment, see. I sign the lease and pay up for a year. We're just about set, now. Helen got the license a couple of days ago. The only thing goes wrong is that the *Joseph Grant* gets tied up a little by fog this morning, otherwise I would be an old married man by this time."

Well, this is all pretty stiff news, and it takes me another couple drinks before I can begin to get my arguments against marital bliss lined up straight again. And by that time, O'Malley is down at the other end of the bar, talking to Helen on the telephone and telling her he is back in town, and when can she meet him down at City Hall.

At least, this is what I think he is telling her, since I have gone through the process several times myself, when I am a little more reckless than I am right now. But as it turns out. . . .

"Mac!" O'Malley hollers at me, coming back from the phone. "Something terrible has happened!"

He's white in the face. He gulps down

his drink. "She ain't gonna marry me, bo!"

I feel better. "Well, this is the best thing I hear you say all day."

"Helen won't have anything more to do with me. She says," O'Malley groaned, "that she knows all about that other girl in my apartment!"

NOw, no matter what I say before about women, it does not seem to me to be the worst thing in the world if you rent an apartment that has a sweetmeat built right in. This is not what I tell O'Malley, however; it is just what I am thinking while he fills me in on the details of his phone call with Helen.

It seems that because our ship is a little late getting in, O'Malley's girl friend takes a chance on calling his apartment to see if maybe he has stopped over there first, or something like that, and instead of William J. O'Malley, her beloved, picking up the phone, she gets this here female voice that tells her no, Mr. O'Malley is not in but is expected soon and is there any message. If there is, I guess it is a message that will melt the phone company's wires, because Helen is plenty burned up.

"She won't talk to me—she just hangs up on me," O'Malley says. "And she is gonna mail back my ring. Mac, I got to do something!"

I suggest that we have several more boilermakers, but this does not strike O'Malley as a good idea. He thinks it will be wise for him to rush uptown to Helen's office and catch her before she goes to lunch. Maybe he can explain that he knows nothing about any woman in his apartment.

"Here," he says, giving me the new key. "You go over to my place and see about this girl, like a good guy. I don't believe it, that there's any girl there, I mean. It's a mistake, I'm sure. But if there is, Mac, will you please see that she gets out of there!"

I grin at him.

"Mac, I'm telling you—I don't know nothing about this other girl! Wipe that

look off your face, will you? Stow it!"

I look at him and shake my head. "You know what they say about still water running deep, Willie."

Well, I am kidding him, of course, because I don't think Willie O'Malley is the kind of guy who keeps another sweetmeat in the apartment where he is planning to move in with a new bride, and finally I tell him okay, I will see what I can do about unraveling the mystery, and I sail out of the *Seaman's Salute* under a full head of steam. The way I leave it with O'Malley, he is to go uptown and get Helen and bring her back to his apartment, and during this time I am supposed to get the other sweetmeat out of his place, if indeed there is one there.

There is. And that ain't the half of it.

The way it comes about is this. I hope a bus over to 25 Maywoodie Drive, which is the address that O'Malley gives me. It is quite some layout—a whole bunch of red brick apartment houses, eight, nine stories high, that look the same except that they all go off in different directions from a center court.

There are some housewives sitting out on the benches in the court, chewing the fat or just soaking up the sun while their kids are trampling over the lawns or pulling up the flowers. Nobody gives me a second gander as I wander around, checking the numbers, but they all give me a pretty heavy first look before they go back to their gossiping.

Finally I locate the door which has got Number 25 on it, and sure enough inside there is a bell and a letterbox with the name William J. O'Malley big as life.

I go upstairs to the fifth floor. O'Malley's place is right off the head of the stairs, according to another name plate, and I try the key he gives me. It is strictly no dice. It goes into the lock okay, but obviously this key and this lock are not made for each other, and I am standing there in the hall wondering what the hell I do now when all of a sudden the knob turns and the door

opens slick as you please and I gape.

There is a hand on the other side of the knob, and this hand is attached to a slim little wrist, which is attached to as trimly lined a redhead sweetmeat as these sailor's eyes have ever taken a bearing on.

Now what this redhead has in the way of superstructure is something I do not run across in many a port of call, and I guess I just stand there like a guy without a compass, staring at this kind of dame that every sailor since Columbus dreams about on a cold night's watch. She is wearing some kind of green outfit, not exactly a dress and not a suit either, because they never cut a suit collar this far down to the main deck, if you know what I mean.

"Yes?" she says.

Now, I don't feel this way since I see Maisie, my first wife, and if I am a younger man, I would be barking right out loud like a hungry seal.

"I'm a friend of Willie O'Malley," I manage. "He told me to meet him here."

"Oh!" Her green eyes do a little dance up and down the length of my six and a half foot frame. "Oh—yes—of course."

Maybe she is just excited, meeting a guy like myself—which is an effect I have on some sweetmeats, particularly the redhead ones. I ain't ready for the wheel chair yet.

"Won't you come in, Mr.—"

"MacClennan. Aloysius MacClennan. My friends call me Mac."

I look around, and it is a comfortable set of rooms, cheerful and not cramped for space.

"This is O'Malley's place, ain't it?"

"Oh, yes," she says, smiling. "I am a friend of his, Miss Mullane. I—er—expect he will be back shortly. He—er—just stepped around the corner to get some cigarettes."

WELL, this is news, all right, because I know the O'Malley she is talking about is not the O'Malley I am familiar with,

since my O'Malley never smokes a cigarette, that I know of, in all his life. And besides, if this Mullane sweetmeat will only take a look at the coffee table over in front of the love seat she will see a full pack of cigarettes staring her in the face.

Something about this little sweetmeat is not quite seaworthy, I am thinking, because this is an O'Malley's apartment, sure enough, and I have the feeling that there are not two O'Malleys.

"Would you care for a cup of tea, Mr. MacClennan?"

I can't help the way my face falls down at this suggestion.

"Or something a little stronger, perhaps," she says, and gives me a smile like the time that search light finds me when I fall overboard one night.

I say amen to this liquid heat. Now I don't know what the story is hére with this sweetmeat, and I don't know how much time it is going to take before O'Malley and his bride-to-maybe come charging in, but it seems to me the best thing I can do is play along with this redhead and haul close to the wind until I can see which way this boat is going.

So I settle on the love seat as she ankles out to the kitchen and plays tinkle with some icecubes and gurgle with some bottled joy juice, and before you know it we have a very fine looking pair of drinks in front of us.

I take a very miniature sip. "Just what the doctor ordered! But I wonder if you would have a piece of rye bread around the house, Miss Mullane? This is a funny little habit of mine I pick up in the—er, the Orient."

"With or without seeds?" she says, and I say it don't make no nevermind. So off she goes into the kitchen again to get the bread for this habit of mine—which is a habit, in your eye. It is something I think of since I sit down. The real habit with me is never let a strange sweetmeat mix a drink for me since that one time I wake up

in Chicago—one thousand miles inland, mind you!—and find that I am married to Louise.

By the time the redhead gets back from the kitchen with the rye bread, I play a little game of checkers with our glasses—she has got my drink and I have got hers.

Cheers, happy days, down the hatch, and she matches me belt for belt, though she does not nibble on the rye bread like I do, and I ask her if she happens to know O'Malley for a long time.

No, just a couple months, since he moves into this apartment. "He is a friend of a friend, so to speak. I was having trouble finding a place to live, and Mr. O'Malley was kind enough to suggest that I use his place while he was away. He is a sailor, you know."

She is having trouble with her mascara, I guess, because she rubs a finger in her eye. "It was quite a break for me."

"I'll bet." I look down at our empty glasses. "How soon do you think he'll be back?"

"Oh, very shortly. Here—I'll fix us some more."

But when she gets up, she don't look so sharp, and she has to catch a hold of the arm of the love seat. "Dear me," she says, "I'm not used to—a drink in the—aft—afternoooooo—"

And bingo! Down she goes.

When I have her laid out on the love seat, I'm congratulating myself on the drink switch that I pull. Then all of a sudden it occurs to me that I have not made things any better, from O'Malley's point of view, after all.

It is more than an hour or so since I leave O'Malley, and I do not know how much longer it is going to be before he gets here with Helen. Sure as hell there is something phony going on here, but a knocked-out redhead in the place is not going to make points for O'Malley with his sweetmeat.

I take a peek out the windows. The court-

yard is still full of cackling housewives and their broods of noisy kids. If there is a back way, I do not know about it, and it will take some research on my part before I go carting a conked-out sweetmeat around the halls and stairways of O'Malley's residence.

So I figure, it's got to be a closet for this Mullane redhead until I can get the lay of the land, and I take her into the bedroom and find the closet there.

And that is when I really begin to worry, for O'Malley and for his Helen and for Aloysius MacClellan. Because when I open the closet door, there is somebody else in the apartment, too. A little guy, nice dresser, around forty or forty-five.

Dead.

THREE is something about the way a dead guy bounces when he falls that is like no other flop you ever see. The little guy settles next to the sweetmeat I have dropped in my surprise, and the way I feel right then I am not going to move either of them one solitary inch.

It is out of here goes MacClellan, under all the canvas he can rig. The hell with O'Malley—the hell with everything! I tell myself the smartest thing I can do is give this joint the wide berth and get back to the *Seaman's Salute*. Everything I ever tell O'Malley about having nothing to do with women comes right back to me, then, because it is true like I have always said, and this collection of trouble lying on the floor in front of me certainly proves it to the hilt.

No matter how many drinks I have today I don't feel any of them in the slightest way, and in the kitchen I find the bottle. I am getting what liquid courage I can when I hear a voice behind me.

"Take it easy, buster. I may need some of that stuff myself."

It is a big, rangy-looking character, corn-color hair and empty-looking eyes. But there is nothing empty about one of his hands, which is occupied by a flat model

automatic with a bore that looks bigger around than the neck of the bottle that I am holding.

"Set it down, on the table," he says, waving at the bottle. "No tricks or I'll cut you."

I have no idea about any kind of tricks. I put the whiskey on the table, very careful.

"What the hell's goin' on here anyway? I can't leave the place for ten minutes, somethin' don't happen. What'd you do to Mimi? Huh Talk up, talk up!"

"Look," I try, "I don't know what any of this is all about, mister. I come here looking for my pal, O'Malley, who owns the apartment and the next thing I know—"

"What'd you do to Mimi, punk?" He shoves the cannon closer to my middle. "She's out like a light in there with Kernifer."

"She gets a drink mixed up with one she fixes for me," I tell him. "I think she is trying to put me to sleep for some strange reason, only she don't remember what glass is hers."

"Broads!" He waves the gun impatiently. "They're all alike—these dumb broads! Why the hell do they have to play it cute all the time, I ask you now, I ask you."

Well, I do not get a chance to tell him, because as soon as I start to open my mouth he snarls, "Shaddup! Don't flap your lip at me. Make some coffee. We got to get that broad up on her feet."

I put the coffee water on to boil; then he makes me lead him into the bedroom and get the redhead off the floor. It is no use trying to get her on her feet, since they keep folding underneath her, and she is one limber little bundle, snoring like a baby.

We sit her in a chair in the kitchen and prop her to keep her from falling off. Then the guy with the gun tells me to go in and get the guy, too.

"On your shoulder, buster. Ain't you never learned your first aid? Carry him over your shoulder."

"What are we going to do?"

"You're gonna take him downstairs to

the car and this rod and me'll follow.

I ask, "You don't forget there are a lot of people hanging around downstairs just looking for something to gossip about? They might even think it is a good idea to call the local constables and then—"

"Never mind the guff. Just load him and take off."

He points me out the door with his gun and we go down the hall, not the way I come up, but to the other end of the corridor, and there the guy with the gun opens a door and behind it is a sort of inside fire escape. He listens at the landing and when there is no noise like anybody walking up or down he nods at me and I go down in front of him.

Parked out in back of the building is a long, black sedan, and I have to stuff the dead man named Kernifer into the trunk. All the time, that big cannon is tapping me in the kidney, and I can tell that this here gunman is not very happy hanging around. He is in a sweat, all right, which is something I can't blame him for, as it seems pretty logical to me to guess that he is the one who chills this Kernifer in the first place.

But it isn't making me feel any better to figure that as soon as the sweetmeat wakes up and the gunman is ready to take off with her—or even sooner, for that matter, if he isn't going to wait for her—Aloysius MacClennan is going to be real bad off. This corn-haired guy isn't going to leave me in a way that I can do any transmission to the cops, so it will be *over* and *out* for me.

THREE'S nothing I can do, though, to get the gun away from him. Once, on the way back upstairs, I try slipping around one landing real fast, hoping maybe I can at least break up his sight on me long enough . . .

It's no good; he has some pretty good reflexes, I guess, because he speeds around the turn right with me, jams me hard in the spine with the barrel.

"Live a little longer, wise guy. Don't get foolish."

I am not the least bit foolish—I am plain shaky. If I have only a suspicion before, it is a fact now that MacClennan don't have long for this world.

In the apartment, the water is boiling and no matter how I stall, it seems the coffee is ready in no time at all. He makes me try pouring some into the sweetmeat, which does not work out very well at all, with me being as nervous as I am and she being as unconscious as she is. About all I do is burn off some of her lipstick and stain up her pretty little chin, until finally the gunman grunts:

"Forget it, forget it. I guess you better pick her up. We'll take her down to the car, too."

"In the trunk?"

"Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea at that, the dumb—no. In the back seat."

Well, she is much lighter than the last load I carry, and this is how it comes about that I do not throw her over my shoulder. One arm under her shoulders, one arm under her knees and I have got her up and going. Maybe it is because I am so close to the sign-off that I get sentimental and think that this is really one well-put-together little sweetmeat and if I had not met her in O'Malley's apartment, why, maybe she could make me change my mind about redheads. . . .

Now it is a little while since I have thought of Willie O'Malley and I am certainly next to the most surprised individual in the world when the door opens and there is Willie O'Malley in the flesh. The reason I say I am next to the most surprised individual in the world is because that title belongs to O'Malley, or to the sweetmeat with him, or to the guy with the gun who is a little to one side behind me.

"Mac!" says Willie.

"Good heavens!" chirps what I guess is Helen.

"Hey, what the—" says the gunman.

Like I say, it is a pretty close thing, which one of them is the most surprised, but I will give the prize to the corn-haired gunman, seeing as how I help him out a little in this department when I sort of half turn and throw the redhead sweetmeat right in his direction.

It is not the clearest thing in my mind just what happens after that, though I remember that I yell at O'Malley, "Over to you," and he reads the message clear as a bell. I guess we both follow the flying redhead pretty close. Anyway, there is plenty of static—the gun booming loudest over the shrieks from Willie's sweetmeat and the grunts and groans of Willie and yours truly.

All of us—except Willie's Helen—end up in a ball on the floor, arms and legs and hands and guns flailing around and I hit somebody several good clomps and receive several myself, but I am wrong about this Helen not being in the thick of things also, because I accidentally sock her in the girdle as she is trying to pull out all of the redhead's hair. Probably she still thinks that the redhead sweetmeat is out to take her Willie away from her, and there is no time to tell her that the redhead is in dreamland.

By the time that I am ready and able to do some talking, Willie has the gun in his hand and the guy with the corn-colored hair is stretched out like a gaffed fish, without another quiver in him.

"Mac! Are you all right?" says Willie.

"Willie, you swore there was no girl here!" wails Helen.

"Let's have a drink," I say. "Willie, put that gun away and let's call the cops."

"That hussy! That no-good hussy!" screams Helen.

"Now, Helen, dear," Willie tries to calm her. He moves his arms, to put them around her, but she shakes him away, and somehow the gun goes off again—*blam!*—and I'm damned if Willie doesn't shoot the bottle of whiskey right off the sink out there

in the kitchen. But it couldn't be helped. Oh, yes, Helen faints, too.

We got three bodies lying on the floor by the time the cops get there.

THETHE way the boys in blue perk up when they see the redhead sweetmeat, you think they have found their fairy princess or something. And the body of Kernifer, down in the car, gives them quite a jolt, also. When it all ends up, there are more cops and plainclothesmen running around than I think there is on the whole force.

The cops from Homicide bring a doctor with them, and after he says sure thing, Kernifer is dead all right, he comes upstairs and gives Helen a whiff of salts, and revives the corn-haired gunman, and in a little while he even gets the redhead out of her dreams.

She calls me several kinds of old sea dog, right in front of Helen, and there are a lot of red faces blushing around the room before the cops pack up the redhead and the gunman and cart them off to the pokey.

The way one of the lieutenants tells it, this redhead comes from Chicago, like Kernifer does, and the cops are looking for him for quite some time. It seems Kernifer holds up a bank or two and gives the money to the sweetmeat to hold for him. He gives it to her because he figures that if he ducks out to the West coast and she comes East, the cops will have a tough time finding them, since they don't know the redhead is in on any heist. Well, this is how he tells it to us and it does not make too much sense, but no matter.

The whole thing it proves is that this here dead fellow, Kernifer, don't know as much about redheads as I do, and this is his big mistake, trusting this redhead with all that dough, because she gets the idea that she should have it, and not Kernifer, and if she can hide out pretty good, why maybe Kernifer doesn't find her ever. Well, it does take Kernifer quite some time to find her in this apartment of Willie's, and

then it does him no good whatsoever, since by this time she is chummy with the gunnie who knocks off Kernifer, sniff, like that, clean as a whistle.

Only I happen to come in just between the time they have deceased Kernifer and the time that the gunman is downstairs getting the car around in back. And it is very lucky for Aloysius MacClennan that the guy with the gun does not come back earlier, the way the sweetmeat figured he would, or else she has him knock me off, too.

"But why my apartment?" Willie wants to know. "How come she picked my apartment."

We are watching the lieutenant counting the hatboxes full of money that he finds in the bedroom closet. I have never seen such bundles of bills in all my life!

"Where's a better place than here? The rent paid up in advance, the tenant at sea." The lieutenant nods. "It was a perfect setup—an apartment in someone else's name."

"But how does she get in here in the first place?"

The lieutenant shrugs. "You never meet her anywhere?" he asks Willie. "You never tell her you are going away on a trip and got an empty apartment?"

Helen glares at Willie something fierce and I can see that she is a very suspicious sweetmeat—something like my Louise—and she is going to make married life one tough sled for Willie O'Malley.

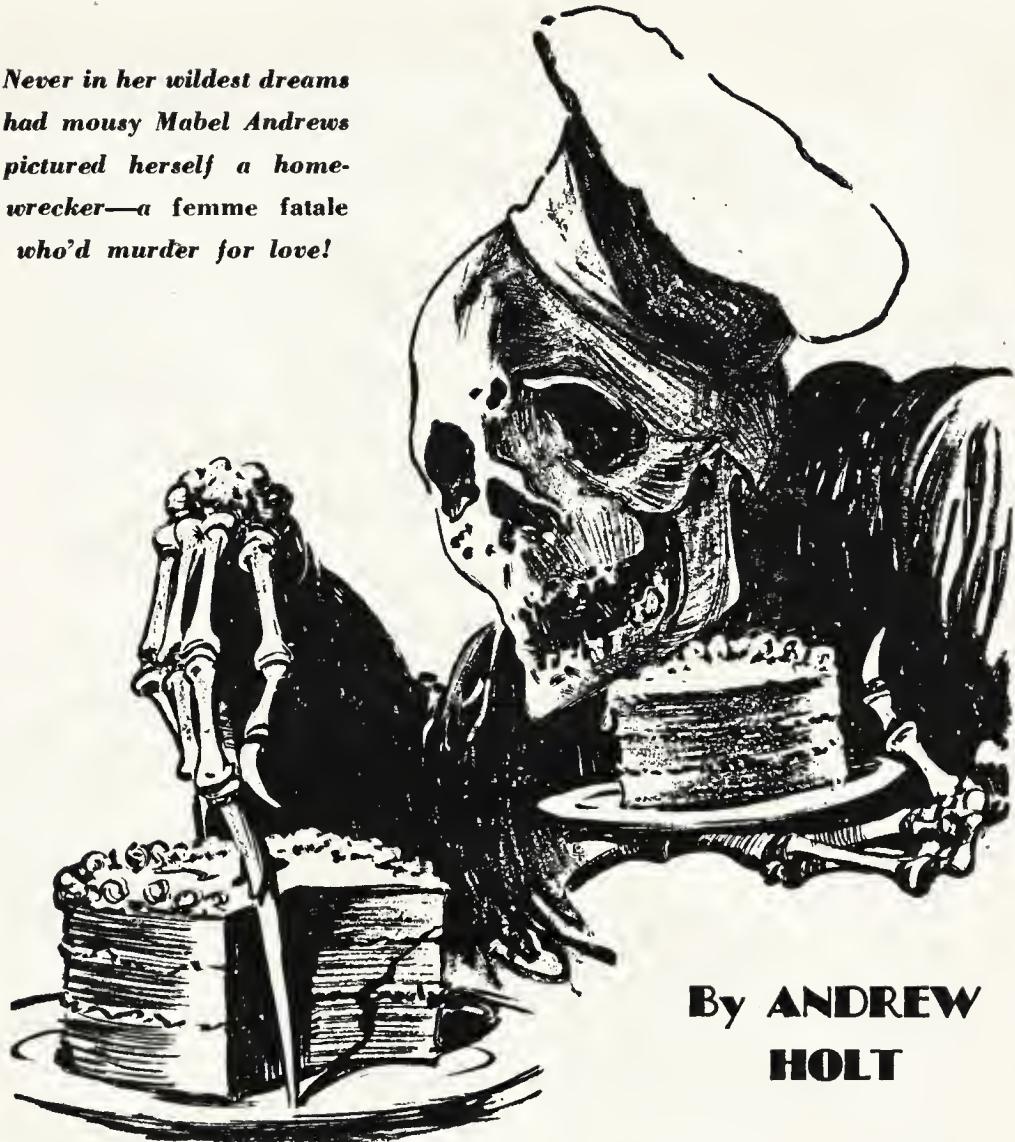
"Good heavens, no!" gasps Willie. "On my honor!"

Well, the lieutenant figures, she finds out about the place some way, it doesn't matter. Probably through a rental agent or somebody, who tells her all the apartments in this new development are rented—oh, there's any number of ways, the lieutenant says.

"Besides," he laughs, "what are you worried about? There is a twenty-thousand-dollar reward on Kernifer.

(Continued on page 111)

*Never in her wildest dreams
had mousy Mabel Andrews
pictured herself a home-
wrecker—a femme fatale
who'd murder for love!*



By ANDREW
HOLT

DEATH ON A PLATTER

THE worst moment was the last, at the gate, just as she was going in. Old Mrs. Matthews, with the set to her mouth that meant she was intent on gossip, came panting up the sidewalk toward her, calling anxiously. She wanted to run, to drop it and run.

She had been carrying it so carefully. Now she wanted to drop it quickly behind the dusty hedge—to let it fall and smash, wasting the fresh eggs, the pure butter, the almonds and the cream. It seemed to her suddenly that with a single look Mrs. Matthews would know, and what Mrs.

Matthews knew, the whole town would know.

They all would know that inside the box, instead of Vanderbruck's fanciest, most expensive cake, instead of a gift that any of them would take proudly to the town's richest invalid, there was . . .

Yet all the time she was remembering that they *had* to know about the cake, that it was part of the plan. She *had* to go casually, publicly, to Flossie Cox's house with the box held in plain view for all the world to see.

So she forced herself to stand there, smiling a fixed, idiotic smile, nodding, clucking her tongue, fitting the gestures into a conversation that was meaningless and endless.

And when she was inside at last, safe, in the shabby little room that was her parlor, bedroom, and dining room in one, she was so weak that she had to sit down.

Something inside her said "no," repeated it, screamed it. She got up without knowing what she was doing and walked to the mirror over the dresser. Staring into it, between the snapshot of Cousin Amy's youngest and the booklet of exercises that would correct her posture and glamorize her curves if she could remember to do them faithfully, she saw herself clearly.

The drawn mouth with its unskilled smear of ladylike pink lipstick. The weak, tear-smudged eyes. The drab skin that was now, somehow, not so drab but almost fresh. The colorless hair and the new sheen that overlaid it.

Funny that nobody in town had ever noticed either of those two changes. She had often thought, with a kind of grim amusement, that if they saw you mousy for the first thirty-five years of your life, they would see you mousy forever, no matter what. But this time the cynicism did not amuse her. She was leaning forward, close to the glass, looking deeply into her own eyes, speaking her own name.

Mabel Andrews. Mabel. . . .

Was she really standing there, staring at herself, looking at the brown spots the arsenic had made under her eyes? Was she really going to—? But even to herself, even now, she could not say the word.

She saw herself clearly, the way she had seen herself every day for these months since they made the plan. Mabel Andrews, spinster. Drab, too thin, a little stooped. Mabel Andrews in the dress department of Mullin's. How long was it now?

Nearly twenty years. Since her fifteenth birthday. Twenty years of helping other women choose dresses—for dances and weddings, for engagements and christenings, and just for men. Mabel Andrews, who had no man of her own and never would have. Until, one day, there was George Cox.

Not that they knew, the women who condescended to her as she bent to pin their hems. No, Burlsville did not know. How they would have buzzed if they had!

Mabel Andrews and anybody's husband, let alone George Cox, the husband of the richest woman in town! Burlsville would not have believed it—not even if every man, woman and child of them had been standing behind the lilac bush in back of the church, the first time George kissed her. . . .

GEORGE had kissed her many times since then. Two years of stolen kisses, behind the church, deep in the woods outside the town, in the car, and once, gloriously, almost without the feeling of stealing, when they met "accidently" in the city.

That was after he gave her the first powder. She remembered it now, vividly. The little square of white paper folded into a packet with a faint whiff of drugstore smell rising from it as she took it in her trembling fingers and tucked it into her bag, quickly, almost as if merely holding it in her hands was dangerous.

How George had fussed, worrying about her, reminding her.

"Don't forget, Mabel," he said, maybe for the tenth time. "No liquids after you take it. Remember, now."

He felt how frightened she was and he smiled.

"Mabel." He spoke softly. "You know I wouldn't hurt you, Mabel."

And then he kissed her, right there in the hotel lobby, with the clerk at the desk liable to turn and see them at any moment —just as if he were Mabel Andrew's man and all the world could know it.

That was two months ago. She had taken the arsenic so many times now that she was almost used to it. She had burned the papers quite automatically. The imaginary pains were gone and the feeling of nausea came only now and then, deep inside her.

They were ready to do it.

"You're immune, Mabel," George said. "You could sit down and eat arsenic stew with the whole town, one by one, and nothing would happen to you."

He laughed, his big, rich laugh, but he saw right away that Mabel couldn't laugh and he was contrite in that sweet way of his.

"I'm sorry, dear," he told her, taking her hand in his. "It's not that I'm callous. Only . . . if I let myself think, *really* think about it, I couldn't do it. I've got to pretend that it isn't . . ."

Mabel understood him. The long night hours, the white quiet of the early mornings that found her sleepless, had taught her all there was to know about the desirability of not thinking.

"What she's doing to *us* is a kind of murder, too," George said later.

It was the truth. If only Flossie would . . . but she wouldn't. There was no use. No matter how George begged, she would never divorce him.

She would hang on forever, sitting up in her big bed, wrapped in comfort and little luxuries, eating chocolates; dragging her huge bulk down the stairs to the sofa in the living room to lie there for days on end, opening her penciled mouth to pop in an

eclair or a cream puff, to whine a complaint; growing fatter, more monstrous, each day until her little feet in pink satin could no longer support her and it took both the cook and the gardener to get her up the stairs again.

There was no time now, no time to think.

First the cake. She undid the thin white string, opened the square box, lifted off the top layer and put it carefully down on a platter. Then she whipped the new cream, added the sugar, the almond flavoring and the powder, the last powder.

She lit a match, held the burning paper until the flame licked at her hand. The pain felt good. She dropped the paper in the sink, washed it down the drain.

Then she scooped out a circle of cream from the bottom layer of the cake, with a ring of it carefully left intact around the outside. George had thought of that, too. When she filled the center, the edges were still pretty and fluted the way Vanderbrucks had fixed them.

She replaced the top layer, closed the box, tied the string, washed the bowl, the platter, the egg beater, and the knife, flushed the discarded cream down the drain. She had to hurry.

But, somehow, she couldn't hurry. Her hands fumbled, her thoughts wandered. She knew what it was, of course. She wanted George to come.

HE WAS in Carntown by now, talking business with one of his customers. Maybe he had changed his mind; maybe he was going to walk in, after all, and say, *No, Mabel, you don't have to do it.* . . .

There was a hole in one of the white gloves. She had the needle and thread out before she caught herself. She laughed harshly, and spoke to herself aloud.

"You can let them catch you with a hole in your glove, Mabel," she said.

She put on the hat and picked up the box. It was time to go. George was not coming. She was in it. There was no way out for

her. It was her job. Her job—alone.

She opened the front door and, to force herself over the threshold, she told herself once more. The reason they had to do this was because George was so good.

It sounded crazy. But it was true. George was the kind of man who couldn't walk out on Flossie. Because, if he did, out of sheer spite, Flossie would take her money out of the drug company and close down the plant, and half of Burlsville, two hundred and seventy-eight men, would be out of work and their families would be hungry.

She crossed the railroad tracks and climbed the gentle, sloping hill to the town's best street. Dr. Raymond passed and tipped his hat. She opened Flossie Cox's gate and walked up the long curve of the driveway, through the overhang of the heavy, shingled porte-cochere.

The smile spread itself on her face, set, congealed, like a porcelain mask over the shaken softness inside. She rang the bell.

"Good afternoon, Miss Andrews."

Anna knew when she was opening the door to one who was in no way her superior.

"Good afternoon, Anna."

Her voice surprised her. The far-off sound of it was calm, impersonal. She handed the maid the box.

Anna took it without a word. Tribute was due and expected from such as Mabel. She walked back into the dark hallway toward the kitchen.

Mabel found her own way, slowly, past the big mahogany-framed mirror, the umbrella stand, and the stag-antler hat rack to the wide parlor door.

She was trembling. This was the beginning. Anna must unwrap the cake, see Vanderbrucks' box and string and wax paper, the professional swirls and rosebuds. That was necessary, but . . . Mabel said it once to George.

"What if somebody else tastes it?"

She remembered George's bitter smile.

"In my wife's house?"

He had not needed to say more. Mabel

had been here to tea, too many times. She had seen the little dimpled finger of her hostess scrape together the last crumbs of cake and icing, watched her tongue lick the last, infinitesimal blob of cream from the tines of her fork.

She was still standing in the doorway.

"Well, come in, for heaven's sake!" Flossie called.

Mabel walked toward her.

"How are you feeling today?" she asked.

Flossie's mouth crumpled.

"Awful, just awful. Dr. Raymond hasn't even been here."

Mabel looked at the tea table. Just the tea things and one plate of little sandwiches. Flossie had depended on the cake she knew Mabel would bring.

FLOSSIE was still talking. The whine rose and thinned. "Inconsiderate and irresponsible," she was saying. "What Burlsville needs is another doctor—one who will take his work seriously, instead of . . ."

The petulance left her face and a certain eagerness took its place.

"Have you heard?" she asked.

Mabel nodded.

"They were talking about it at the store yesterday. They say he goes to see her every afternoon."

Flossie sat up and leaned forward. The pouf that protected her from drafts slid unheeded to the floor.

"Isn't it *dreadful*? Tell me, have you seen her? Is she really as common as they say?"

Mabel closed her eyes. She felt the twinge of sickness, the barely perceptible premonitory tremor of fear, that gossiping always gave her, but her words were all that they should have been.

"Her hair is bleached. And she's forty-five, if she's a—"

She stopped, as it was customary to stop, when she heard Anna's wooden footsteps. Flossie lay back on her nest of pillows and fluttered weakly. Anna set the cake plate

down on the table and lumbered away.

"Anything else?" she asked from the door.

Flossie opened her eyes.

"Nothing, thank you." The eyes widened. This was, apparently, her first glimpse of the cake.

"Why, Mabel," she said, "you shouldn't!"

Mabel said nothing. Under the rigid smile, beneath the ache of it, she could feel her mouth quiver. She swallowed and clenched her hands against her sides. The "no" that she had wanted to scream all day and all the night before rose shrieking in her throat. She picked up the cake knife.

"Shall I cut it?" she asked quietly.

Flossie's hands moved in protest, a gambit in a familiar game.

"I really don't know if I can. . . ."

"Just a smidgeon?" Mabel urged archly. "A tiny, little piece?"

Her throat was dry. She was dizzy.

"Well . . ." said Flossie, "a teentsy sliver."

Mabel cut two thick wedges, put them on plates, handed one to Flossie, and picked up her own fork. The room was going around, the massive old furniture, the mirrors, the red drapes, and Flossie, whirling beside her. And in the center of the roaring vortex there was nothing left of the malice, the fears, the dreams, of George even—just herself and Flossie and the cake with the arsenic in it.

With a start, she realized that she had let her fork fall to the floor. The blood rushed to her head as she reached for it. In her shaking hand, the silver clattered against her plate, but she couldn't stop it.

Flossie did not seem to notice. There was a small mound of cake and cream on her fork now and she was holding it halfway to her mouth and shuddering at it, delicately, as she always did.

To Mabel, it seemed to take her forever. Then the little mouth opened and the forkful was gone.

Mabel did what she had to do now, without thinking about it, as if on a cue from offstage.

She lifted the heavy lid of the silver teapot and sniffed.

"It's kind of strong," she said. "Do you think we could have some hot water?"

"Of course, dear."

TH E cake was disappearing from Flossie's plate and Mabel's was still untouched. She took her first mouthful when she heard Anna in the doorway.

"Hot water, Anna," Flossie ordered.

Mabel forced herself to take another bite. The taste was so bitter, so metallic. Her eyes flew to Flossie. Surely, she must have . . .

Flossie's fork scraped against the painted daisies on her plate, chasing the last elusive scraps, her mouth opened for them, gaping, like a fledgling bird's mouth yawning for a worm.

Mabel knew then. Strength seeped back into her arms and legs. The taste was imaginary, like the nausea and the burning in her throat, born of her own fear and guilt, as was the creeping time it took for Anna to return with the hot water and for Flossie to work herself around through her pretences to her second piece of cake.

Suddenly she hated her, this woman who was responsible, who was making her do this terrible thing; hated the bloated body, the small hands, the pretty, stupid, fat face.

Anna was there with the jug. With Mabel's returning strength, there had been George's words again, clear and purposeful.

"Make sure Anna sees you eating. And remember, finish every crumb of it. When Anna says she saw you eating it, too, they'll think Flossie got it in something else. Everybody knows how she stuffs herself. No one will suspect you; you've got no motive. And don't forget the plates and the forks—make sure there isn't a scrap of it left, anywhere."

Anna was pouring the tea. Mabel put the

last triangular corner of her cake into her mouth and made herself swallow it. Her throat was constricted.

"No tea," George said, far away, not here where he should be.

Slowly, she leaned forward, the cake knife in her hand, carefully she cut two exact, symmetrical pieces.

"No, really—I couldn't," Flossie said.

Anna's footsteps receded down the hall.

"Nonsense!" Her voice was queer and rough. "It will do you good."

There was a silence. The familiar objects in the room impressed themselves on Mabel's stare. It was nearly over. She had done it.

In the grate the flames curled like plumes. Bright. Unreal. All of it. Everything. It was a dream and she would waken. The pain in her throat would go. George would come back and it would be as it was before. That was enough for her. Let Flossie be his wife. George would kiss her, again, once in a while, behind the church, under the lilac bush.

"Well, you *are* mooning!"

Flossie was sitting up. She had the cake knife in her hand and she was pointing to the last wedge on the cake plate.

"I've asked you three times. Don't you want it?"

It was not possible to speak. Slowly, Mahel shook her head. Flossie looked sadly at the cake.

"It does seem a shame."

Eat it, Mahel whispered inside her brain, eat it! And die quickly. Don't make me talk to you. Don't keep me sitting here. She took hold of the chair arm with both hands. *Please, die quickly!*

Flossie's face was flushed, rosy in the firelight. She looked pretty, ridiculously pretty, like an outsized doll. Her tiny mouth was pursed, her head cocked as she considered the cake.

Suddenly avid, Flossie's hand shot out, plopped the cake onto her own plate. Expertly, she scooped the last, baroque curve

of cream onto the knife. Luxuriously, she licked the broad, flat blade clean.

One, two, three mouthfuls did it. Then the pointed tongue flicked over the tines and the shining fork lay beside the knife. Pink and replete, Flossie smiled.

"I don't care if it does keep me awake, it was worth it."

Her dangling feet slid forward, touched the floor, groped, kicked the little satin mules out from under the sofa.

"No, sit still, I can manage." She spoke to Mahel's startled eyes.

Then incredibly, she was on her feet, swaying, grasping at the sofa back for support, moving toward the door. Mabel sat very still. The cold breath of fear chilled the heated room.

If Flossie called for help, if she fell in the hallway and died there, if . . .

She couldn't take her eyes away from the stumbling, erratic course of the fat woman toward the door. She saw her turn the key, heard the clink of metal it made in the lock, saw the shining brass of it flash as it arched across the room into the fire. Still she couldn't move her body or her eyes. She watched as Flossie returned, changed, smiling, brisk, to sit down again, facing her, and say in a voice that was almost sweet:

"Now, dear, I don't think we have much time, so tell me. Did George get you the poison?"

FLOSSIE smiled anew at the gape of Mahel's jaw, at the wild, hopeless rush of unuttered words behind Mabel's eyes, and the feeble sound that was the beginning and the end of useless denial. When she spoke again, it was almost not a question, but a gentle reminder.

"I suppose he told you he loved you, didn't he? Poor Mahel. George can be appealing when he wants to."

She was on her feet again, easily, as if something had given her back her energy and the power of quick movement, gone so long now with the thickening of her body.

On the mantel she found what she wanted and returned with it in her hand. It was a big envelope, sealed and heavy with papers, with the name of Jesse Wilber, the lawyer, on it.

"I knew," Flossie said. "I knew when he started to pester me for this that he was going to try again."

She turned to the fire with it, for a moment seemed about to toss it to the flames, then turned again, quicksilver, and was beside Mabel, kneeling on the floor.

"Poor Mabel!"

Her hand was hot on Mabel's. Something inside Mabel shrank away from it, but she couldn't withdraw her own hand. She couldn't speak or move, much less run out through the locked door, away from the hot room, the pain in her throat, the sickness the word *again* ringing and reverberating inside her head. Again? George never told her that. George said . . .

Her dulled eyes made out the yellow gleam of Flossie's hair and the face, crinkled with pity, upturned to hers.

"Don't you—?" She started to ask it before she realized that she had anything to ask.

"Hate you?" Flossie finished it for her. She shook her head gently, and leaned back against the sofa, still looking up.

"Oh, why wouldn't you divorce him?" Mabel cried.

Flossie shrugged. She held up the envelope as if it were a talisman, its meaning plain.

"He didn't want a divorce."

The truth was in her eyes, her voice. "He wanted this. A new will . . . my money . . . the company."

Mabel stood up.

"Anna," she said. "Dr. Raymond."

Flossie's hand on her hem held her. She was trying to shake her head, her teeth sunk into her lower lip, her body twisted with sudden pain.

"It's too late—I waited until it was too late. They have to give you the antidote

right away. It only takes twenty minutes."

Mabel sank down beside her, took her hand. An answering wrack of pain swept over her thin body. She knew, as she wished she didn't, that her own pain was unreal, that it was only sympathetic.

Her hand tightened on Flossie's, held it against the tremors that convulsed it, the two of them side by side on the floor, staring into the fire as they had not done since their childhood.

"Why couldn't you have made it something easier?" Flossie whimpered.

"Because of me," Mabel told her, "because I had to eat the cake, too." She made the apology gravely, because at last there was no need of pretense. "Because arsenic was the only thing I could take and get used to, so that I—so I wouldn't . . ."

She stopped. The hand was shaking and writhing in hers again and the blind, searing pain that tortured it, attacked her, too.

It was not until it subsided and she turned weakly to the other woman in a transport of tenderness that she saw that Flossie was laughing.

The spasm came and passed yet again. Flossie lay back, swept her hand across her face, mingling her tears and the little drop of blood that welled from the teeth marks on her lips.

"Mabel," she whispered, "poor Mabel. It wasn't arsenic, Mabel. He fooled you."

MABEL. Mabel Andrews with no man of her own. She saw it all. From the first moment—her hand in George's, his mouth on hers, the leading up to it, the reasonable, loving words.

"Would I ask you, Mabel? Would I let you, if I could do it myself? But we'd never be together then. They'd catch me. The whole town knows my marriage; they know I can get drugs at the plant. If I was even here when it happened, they'd . . . But you can, Mabel. I'll work it out. I'll make it safe for you."

I'll make it safe for you. I'll make it safe

for you. The pain was real, raking its claws across her throat, tearing at her heart.

"What is it, Flossie?" The whisper rose past the pain, hoarse and distorted.

"Bichloride. Bichloride of mercury."

Flossie opened her arms. Mabel put her head down, fought against the knowledge of death, and sobbed into the wide, soft breast.

"They make it at the plant," Flossie said. "He wanted to get rid of both of us. . . . He never loved you, Mabel."

Her voice was kind, consoling.

"He never loved me either. It was only my money. He tried once before. That's how I knew about the bichloride. That's why I made a will. . . . I knew he wouldn't kill me if my family got the money."

She was silent again, fighting for breath. When she spoke, the bitterness was black, corrosive.

"He made me change it. He said we could never be happy until I did . . . until I'd forgiven the past, until I showed that I trusted him. I wanted to trust him, Mabel, but all the time I was really afraid. So I lied—I told him I'd given the will to Jesse Wilber, but I didn't. I kept it. I wanted to see. . . ."

For the first time, a new thought, separate from her own pain, came to Mabel.

"But you ate it," she said. "You knew and you ate it!"

Flossie did no answer directly.

"I was nineteen when we were married. Don't you remember? I weighed a hundred and ten pounds and I was the prettiest girl in town."

Slowly Mabel nodded, lowered her eyes.

"He did this to me. He didn't love me; he wasn't even kind. There are books about women like me—ice cream instead of love, chocolate instead of babies."

Mabel sat up, pulling her weakness upright against the sofa. They stared at each other, their faces white, cold, their eyes opaque, unseeing.

"He'll get the plant and the money. He'll get away with it."

Her words dropped heavily. The pool of silence eddied and rippled in the corners of the room. Flossie moved dully, as if some of life had already left her.

"Anna?"

"They might not believe her . . . without proof."

"If I burn the will—if the old one stands, at least he won't get the money."

"No!" said Mabel.

She grabbed at Flossie's arm with hands that were steel claws.

"No! If he came back and found the will—the way it is, sealed, he'd be afraid to open it. Don't you see? He wouldn't *dare* to open it himself. He'd take it and make the lawyer open it!"

Pain swirled around them. Crawling, supporting each other, alternately weakening, and calling the strength back into each other, they reached the desk.

Mabel wrote it, all of it, the first kiss, and the arsenic that could be found in her, afterward. Flossie signed it, too. They made a new envelope exactly like the old one. They dropped a great blob of sealing wax like dripping blood on the flap.

Then they moved back across the room again, slowly, desperate for the little time that remained to them, stopping for their pain and their sickness, holding each other, intimate, loving, suddenly sisters.

They put the new envelope on the mantel, conspicuous across the face of the clock, and burned the old one, watching until the last wizened, grayish curl of it broke and fell into the embers. . . .

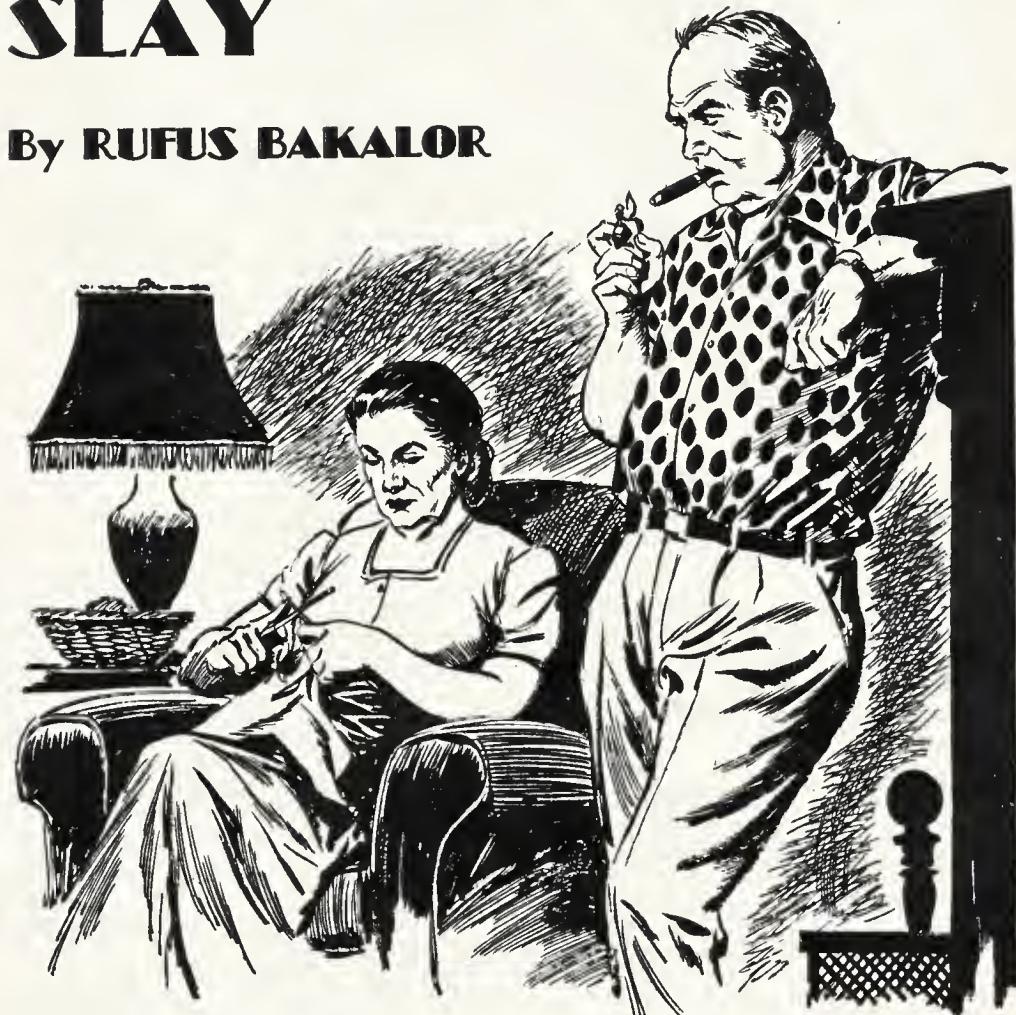
Actually, it was Anna who found the will. When she told George about it, on the telephone, he didn't want to listen. At a time like this, he couldn't. . . . That was what lawyers were for.

Anna took it to Jesse Wilber. Being a lawyer, and all, Jesse knew enough to be discreet. After he called the city hall, he told only his secretary. And his wife.

All Burlsville knew, that night, long before the sheriff met the train. ● ● ●

LOVE, HONOR AND SLAY

By RUFUS BAKALOR



The time for the elimination of Cora had come. . . .

IT IS difficult to imagine just what middle-aged widows of appreciable means saw in Milo Vissers. He was not a dashing man, gallant, well-eyebrowed, debonair. On the contrary, he was a somewhat dumpy meat-cutter, given to gaudy sports shirts, to wearing his hat in the house,

and private noises. Yet he had about him a certain warmth, and perhaps it was this feeling of warmth and coziness that they all sought. If so, they could not possibly have made a more unfortunate choice.

Milo loved to loosen his belt, sigh extravagantly, and wallow in travel folders

*It was a pity Milo had grown fond of his fifth and latest wife.
It made it so much harder to kill her. . . .*

of Rio de Janeiro, to which place he hoped to retire after he had accumulated a modest fortune. "Rio!" he would say to his wife of the moment. "Now, there's a place for you. Seventy-eight in January and sixtve-eight in July. Most modern city in the world, too. Up-to-date. None of this old-fashioned, horse-and-huggy stuff." For Milo disdained what was old-fashioned and believed in keeping abreast of the times, as it shall soon appear.

Milo murdered his first wife, Stella, out of simple necessity, as he saw it. She was a quarrelsome woman with little respect for other people's property, such as travel folders of Rio de Janeiro, and a very annoying curiosity about the money that Milo had taken to invest for her.

The disposition of Stella's body was but a minor problem for one as modern as Milo. He cut her body into convenient pieces and made a number of small parcels wrapped in refrigerator paper. With a wistful smile, he labeled each of the parcels as fancy took him: shoulder butt, rump roast, flank, shank, sweetbreads, and so forth.

He took his parcelled wife to a public deep freeze locker plant in a small town some distance from the city and rented a suitable locker.

"Just salting away a little beef against high prices and scarcities," he explained to the attendant. "My idea is just to put this meat away for about ten years and forget it. So don't you fret if you don't happen to hear from me for a while."

Milo paid ten years' locker rent in advance under the name of J. Sylvester de Pinna, picked up his travel folders and Stella's money, and moved to a different section of the country, where he cast about for a likely victim.

He had nothing against his second wife, Tillye, really. She was, in many respects, an exemplary spouse, and she had surrendered her savings and her first husband's insurance money to him with engaging naïveté. But, he recalled with a shudder,

she did have very cold feet, and she was forever asking him to stoke the furnace or "see if there's a draught, will you, Miles?" (For he now called himself Miles Rensselaer). He had teasingly called her "My chilly Tillye" and she had giggled affectionately. Therefore, on the way to a locker plant with Tillye all neatly packaged and labeled, it was natural that he should remember this endearment and smile a little.

We will pass quickly over Marge and Arlene, Milo's third and fourth wives, respectively, pausing only to note that, as their relationship had worn on, Arlene had begun showing marked signs of coldness.

After he had escorted Marge and Arlene to the deep freeze, Milo found himself a relatively wealthy man. With the money he had gathered in these alliances, he felt that Rio de Janeiro was a certainty for him now, and quite near. One more widow and his dream would become a reality.

When, under the name of Mervyn Updegraff, he courted and married Cora, he scorned her four predecessors as comparative paupers. Cora had even more money than he, and it was with considerable delight that he saw it pooled with his in a joint bank account.

This is it! he thought. After I freeze Cora, I'll be rich. Rich! Rio, here comes Milo!

CORA was very different from Milo's other wives. In fact, she was everything he thought he disliked in a woman, and because of this, he began to fall in love with her. Cupid is often as whimsical as his darts are deadly. Cora was displeasingly plump, morose, given to long periods of silent brooding, and, worst of all, from Milo's point of view she was hopelessly old-fashioned. The style of her clothes lagged through several changes in ladies' fashions. She canned foods copiously. The lampshades in her home had long beaded fringes. There was a Spanish shawl over the player-

(Continued on page 112)

FELONY FOLLIES

by Jakobsson and Waggner

Speaking of drunken driving, our modern age opens up a whole new world. High-ranking culprit in this respect would seem to be the airline pilot above New Delhi, India, who got plastered on duty and refused to surrender controls to his sober second in command. Passengers said he kept hiccuping six thousand feet, up and down, taking his cargo with him in free flight, until they bribed him from the cabin with the promise of another drink.

On landing, he was handed over to local police. They are still looking for the law that covers his case. Seems most traffic regulations all apply, still, to the face of the earth.



A nice regard for the law was shown in Detroit some years ago by Mr. Zigmund Norkoski, who had just been arrested for the second time for wife-beating. "You were warned once before," said the judge, "not to lay a hand on her." Retorted Norkoski, beaming, "I didn't, Judge. I butted her with my head."

But Mr. Norkoski's alibi must take second place to the ingenious excuse of Thomas Pinckney, north-of-England publican, who was haled into court for keeping watered whiskey under his bar. He readily admitted the charge—said he had to keep the stuff on hand to serve his wife's relatives when they dropped in. Such was their thirst, he claimed, that straight whiskey would have made them a menace to law and order. And he had to serve them, because an old law calls it a crime to talk a Briton out of a drink on British soil!

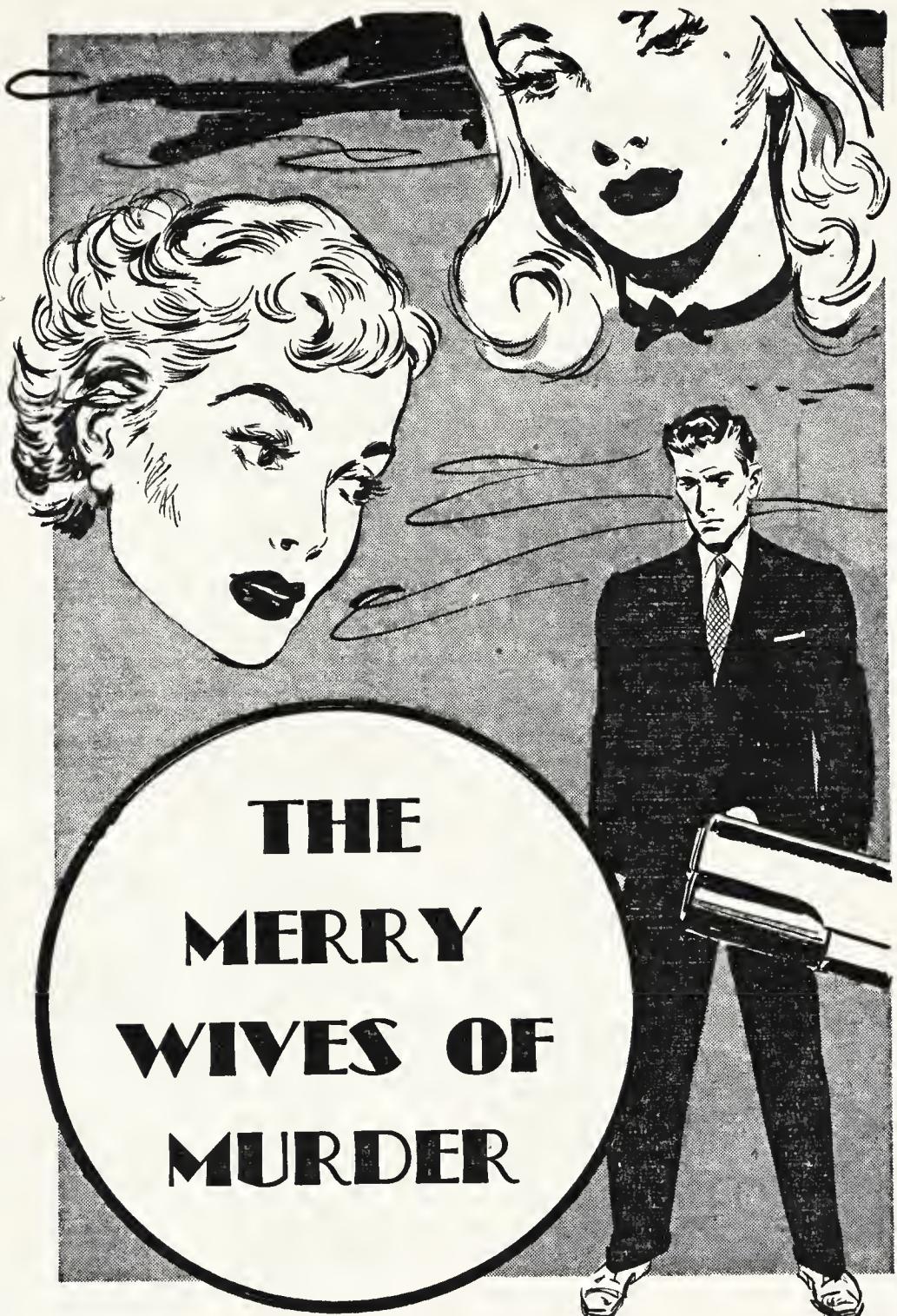


• Lloyd Prevost, young Michigan night watchman, started a life sentence for murder, back in 1920, only after the most expensive experts the state could assemble had carefully proved him a killer. The jury, too, was carefully picked and intelligent. A few years later, a dying man confessed to his priest that he was the true killer, for whose crime Prevost was rotting in prison. The priest was as careful and true as the State of Michigan—not until he knew he was on his own deathbed, did he tell the story to another priest, who finally carried it to Michigan's governor.

And so, to Prevost's surprise, he was given a pardon and freedom after eight hopeless years of confinement for a crime he hadn't committed.



From Illinois comes one of the strangest cases of vicarious punishment on record. The state knew it was sending the wrong man to jail for the killing of Betty Crabb—knew it, and was powerless. Here's how it happened. Banker Willis Crabb, of Delevan, who had always spoiled his young son, Jimmy, even stood by when Jimmy was accused of wife-killing. In the expensive legal turmoil which followed the killing, it was suddenly discovered that Crabb had embezzled \$75,000 from his bank to finance his son's defense. Banker Crabb went to Leavenworth for four years. At the end of that time, son Jimmy, still free on bail, took an overdose of sleeping pills. He had never served a sentence for the killing—the money his father embezzled and went to jail for had kept him out.



THE
MERRY
WIVES OF
MURDER



• •

Maybe he could handle three tempestuous wives; maybe he could even bust Silky Ingham's mob—but could Toughy Jordan wriggle out of a frame-up that included a dead blonde in his bathtub?

• •

Exciting
Crime-Adventure
Novelette
By
TAIAH DEVITT

I'M NOT a guy who has much luck at matrimony. My first wife walked out when Silky Ingham's boys threw a bomb through the bedroom window. I tried to explain to Annabella that we had to expect things like that. I was representing the reform interests. I was trying to build a decent organization of honest citizens and clean up our town. That bomb was like a decoration. I was succeeding, see? I was already getting in Silky's hair.

Our town is just like a hundred others. The decent element didn't wake up to what was happening until Silky Ingham had moved in and grabbed all the power.

Understand this: Actually, I'm no reformer. I don't mind a little small-time graft, as long as it doesn't affect the lives

and interests of needy citizens. But Silky Ingham isn't a small-fry politician slipping his friends a little gravy. Silky is all rat; a vicious racketeer and a killer.

My fight with Silky wasn't civic. It was personal. It started when Silky murdered my dad.

My old man was a great guy. He represented all that was decent and fine and honorable. He was a fearless and honest judge. A judge whose integrity had never been questioned, a man who simply could not be bought. He was one of the first to wake up to the menace of Silky Ingham's rule. He went after Silky's mob tooth and nail, but it was a lonely fight. He got no cooperation anywhere. The police department and the D. A. were both in Silky's grip, and Silky was making his own amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Citizens weren't free and equal; they were vassals of Silky Ingham and they played his way or else.

I was working on a newspaper back East, and I didn't pay much attention to Dad's one man crusade. Maybe I'd grown a little callous. I didn't pay attention until the blow fell, and then it was too late. It's no use now, trying to figure what might have been—if I'd rushed home and helped Dad battle it out in the beginning.

I didn't go back. Silky got scared of my Dad, scared of that one voice raised against him—so he struck. No, he didn't shoot him down. He did something rotterer than that. He framed him. He framed my dad so beautifully that even his life-long friends believed the judge was guilty. Dad tried to put up a fight but there was nobody behind him; nothing behind him but his own impeccable record. Silky broke him. Broke his heart and his health and his spirit. So Dad died in disgrace.

I went home to bury Dad—and to plant Silky Ingham. There was murder in my heart. After the funeral, a cold barren service on a bleak day, I went home to the empty house. I walked into my dad's study

and to his desk. I pulled out the right hand top drawer and reached for his gun. It was a funny, old-fashioned gun that had been there ever since I was a kid. I pulled it out and weighed it in my hand, hate in my soul. And as I looked at that gun my eyes slid upward to the wall. Hanging on that wall was a framed photograph of Dad with a group of other judges. I sat looking at them and thinking.

As I sat there, it came to me that decent citizens believe in law and order. Any mug can pull a trigger. Any hood can kill. Sure, I could tail Silky. One day he'd get careless and I could blast him down, and it would be a good riddance. But that isn't the way Dad would have wanted it. That was no way to avenge a man who placed honor above life itself.

I thought it over. It would take brains and guts and patience to clean up a mob like Silky's, but I had to do it that way. I stowed the rod and sat trying to figure angles. I began with not more than a hunch.

Then I sent East for all of our stuff and moved into Dad's house. I went down town and took an office, hired a secretary and set up a public relations council—you know, press-agent. Nobody seemed to think it was funny that Toughy Jordan was back in town. They remembered me as a scrappy kid and thought I'd come back to show 'em I could take it; that Dad's disgrace didn't have me licked.

At first business was plenty slow, and it drove me crazy. But I knew I was laying the foundation for something big. I knew Silky Ingham was watching me, waiting. I put over a local dog show in fine style and the Bird Lover's outing and the annual charity drive. When the reform elements doddered together for another futile effort, I weaseled in and persuaded them to let me run their show, too. That was the break I'd been waiting for. At last my job was under way.

I must have made a swell start—else why

the bomb through the bedroom window?

I tried to explain that to Annabella. Now Annabella is a swell girl, a gorgeous thing. She was a New York show girl, a stunning blonde. She loved the bright lights and the gay life and I didn't blame her. Naturally, she didn't like living in our town. And more than that she was worried.

"Toughy," she said, "I'm thinking of you! They got your old man. They'll smear you too. You haven't got a chance. Toughy, Silky Ingham is big time; he's a killer. You can't do any good here and you don't owe this damn town anything. Let's forget it, Toughy, and go back to New York."

Well, I couldn't go. I tried to make her see my side. Annabella was a good sport—until after that bomb episode. Then she delivered her ultimatum. We'd go back East, pronto, while I was still all in one piece. Or she'd get a divorce.

She got the divorce and a nice hunk of alimony.

JOAN was my secretary, and a honey. Green eyes and red hair and the kind of figure that always took my mind off my business. Besides, she knew my Dad. She knew him and loved him and was willing to do anything to clear his name. Marrying Joan was the most natural thing I ever did in my life. That was the trouble. She was such a pal I forgot she was a woman. It never occurred to me she wouldn't understand about Eloise.

But she didn't. I was up to my neck with reformers, and we weren't making any progress. Then one night I dropped in at this joint of Silky's and saw Eloise. She was checking hats. The sweetest little wide-eyed thing you ever saw, with a baby face and a little lisp and soft, fair curls.

Her being in a dump like that was an outrage. And she hated it. I'll never forget her telling me how much she hated it, and how Silky was always making passes at her and how her old hellion of a mother wanted her to be nice to Silky! I was red.

I saw too, that as long as Eloise was in that spot, she could hand me out some sweet information about Silky's mob. Sort of tip me off to what was going on. Now, of course, I had to be subtle. I couldn't just tell that sweet little kid that I was using her. I had to take her out and buy her presents and, well—I admit, I didn't mind.

But Joan didn't understand. And she didn't give me a chance to explain. She flew down to Mexico and got a divorce before I realized she was mad. I guess red-headed dames are like that. But it was an awful blow to me. I meant to write her and say all the things I hadn't said. Then I thought I'd take a plane and meet her in Mexico and take her on a whirl, a real honeymoon, and make up for the past.

I would have too, only the trouble broke. As I mentioned, Eloise had an old battle axe of a mother. And she said I had ruined her daughter's reputation; me, a married man "trifling with her baby."

Well, she sort of had me because if I got mixed in a scandal (and that she-bear-cat would have raised an awful stink) the reformers would drop me fast. Eloise was awfully sweet. She sat and cried and cried, said she didn't want to force me to marry her when I didn't love her; nobody ever had loved her; and it was her tough luck that she was so nuts about me. Well, she went on saying how crazy she was about men, and I got the idea that marrying Eloise was a damn good idea.

So we got married and I was happy, although I missed Joan like hell. It certainly was different being married to Eloise. She was a helpless little thing. We had to take all our meals out because she couldn't cook. And it cost me plenty living in the swell hotel where she wanted to live because she was afraid to stay alone since I was bucking Silky Ingham. Buying Eloise the things she had to have, (her mother was always pointing out what she could have had if she'd married Silky) and paying alimony, to Annabella kept me in the red. But I

knew there was real money in the public relations business and that something would turn up.

Something did. I fell into a big account.

I found old man Hedges back in the want ads. Just a small article on page seventeen, saying Ezekiel Everett Hedges had given ten grand to endow an orphans' home. Can you imagine that? Ten grand, and not even his picture in the paper!

I GRABBED my hat and went out looking for Hedges. I found him hoeing in his garden behind his modest little cottage. He was tall and on the thin side, with a mane of white hair and a drooping yellowish mustache, but his eyes were smart, shrewd. For a man of his age, his face was singularly unlined. He was lonely and he talked. He told me he'd been an orphan himself, and managed by hard work and careful investments to make a comfortable fortune.

"Mr. Hedges," I said, "you don't want to be just an anonymous donator to worthy charities. This city needs you, needs you bad. You're the man to be built up in the public mind to head the civic reform commission!"

Then I told him what we were trying to do, what we were up against. He was deeply interested, and he knew I was sincere. When I left he was whole-heartedly in favor of my plan.

I gave Hedges a tremendous build up. I got his picture on the front page. I got some other people to donate to his orphans' home. Before you knew it, he had retained me to handle all the publicity for all his charities, and the old boy was putting out plenty. I guess it was because he was lonely that he took such a liking to me. Anyhow he was paying me a swell salary and bonuses. He even wanted to erect some kind of a memorial to my dad.

I felt great. With Hedges' money behind us, the reformers could really get going. Before I started the big drive, though,

I took a brief vacation. I went down to Kentucky to see the Derby.

I suppose I should have taken Eloise. But you know how a guy is. I told her I was called away on business, and went down with my pal from the paper back East, Plank Henry. Joan would have understood. Annabella would have understood too well; but Eloise wouldn't. She'd just see the Derby as number one reason for her buying a lot of new clothes.

After we were down there I did call her and she was a little frosty. In fact, so snippy I thought I might just as well stay away for a few days to give her a chance to calm down.

I had a lot of luck at the track, and I needed it. If I wanted to get in the door at home, I knew it would cost me plenty. I started back home with a silver fox coat. I didn't even have it in a box. As soon as I opened the door I was going to wave it in Eloise's general direction. It would have worked with Annabella.

I wired old man Hedges I was coming back with a terrific new idea. Then I wired the head waiter of our hotel to arrange a little champagne supper. I didn't wire Eloise. I thought if she was still mad she might run off to her horse-faced mother.

CHAPTER TWO

Champagne and Murder

WHEN I got to the hotel, I was singing. It was a swell night with spring in the air. I went through the lobby of the hotel and the head waiter, Fritz, tipped me a wink.

"I hope," he said, "everything is just as you desired."

"Sure," I said. "You didn't say anything to Mrs. Jordan?"

He coughed, and come to think of it now, what he said was kind of funny. "Mr. Jordan, you can always rely on my discretion."

I shrugged. In my telegram, I'd told

him not to mention anything to Eloise.

I went up in the elevator, shaking out the fox coat. I walked down the hall. I came to my door and stood there, trying to figure whether I'd better knock or whether I'd better turn my key and walk right in. I decided to go in easy.

The door opened smoothly and I softly closed it. The living room in our suite is long with big windows looking out over the city. Near the fireplace, I instantly saw the table. Fritz had done himself proud. Lace cloth, silver and crystal sparkling in the candlelight, champagne in the cooler, white orchids—my baby loves white orchids. And on the end table nearest me, a bottle of Scotch and a siphon. Now, that was thinking on Fritz's part. Before I made a sound, I poured myself a stiff one. I guessed Fritz was a married man himself.

I heard the water running in the bathroom. I hung up my top coat in the hall closet and pitched my hat up onto the shelf. Then I tiptoed into the bathroom. The bathroom door was shut, the water still gurgling. It struck me it might be a good idea, instead of my calling out to Eloise, if she just came out and found me sitting by the fire, waiting. Just an old stay-at-home. The kind of a husband a girl can depend on.

So I tossed off my coat and got into my robe and went back to the living room. The paper was there, folded, and I lit my pipe and started to read. I read the war news and the sports page and then I got uneasy. A woman can spend just so much time in a bathroom, and Eloise must have been in there before Fritz brought up the table, and the ice in the champagne cooler was beginning to melt.

A little peeved, I went to the bathroom door and listened. Still I heard the water running. I rapped. There wasn't any answer. Then I knocked louder. "Eloise, baby." No answer. I grabbed the knob and threw the door wide open. I stood looking straight at the basin where the hot water gurgled down the open drain. There was

nobody in the room. It was deserted.

Then I saw the heap of lingerie on a chair. I shut the door and turned toward the tub. I pulled back the drawn shower curtain, and caught the wall to keep from keeling right over.

A woman lay in the bottom of the bath tub. Soft and small and white she lay, face down. There was a little water beneath her, it was red.

I don't know how long I stood there staring. I couldn't make my eyes quite focus. Then I cleared my throat and said:

"Eloise, oh God!" And I bent down and grabbed her. I pulled her onto her knees and her head fell back, and the blood spurted out of the long gash in her throat, all over me and the tub and the wall. The great, open glazed eyes stared into mine. I dropped her and staggered back.

The woman wasn't Eloise.

IN THAT first instant all I knew was an insane relief. It wasn't Eloise, not this ghastly corpse with the neck hacked half through. The eyes were brown; the hair was dyed a dingy yellow.

From somewhere the telephone rang. I heard it without moving. It continued to ring, a shrill high crazy sound, like a skeleton singing. I backed away from the awful thing in the tub, the dead eyes staring after me. I closed the bathroom door. I sat on the bed and raised the phone.

"Hello, hello, Jordan?" It was Old Man Hedges, his voice edgy with irritation. "This is a fine how-de-do," he said. "First you go galavanting off, then you come back and won't answer your phone. I'm on my way up!"

"No!" I shouted. "No!" He hung up.

I sat back. I tried to get hold of myself. My brain refused to answer. The nausea came in waves. I tried to get to the bathroom and pitched forward on my face.

When I came to, my face was burning, my head beating like a war drum. I was aware of the blazing lights frying my eye-

balls before I opened them and looked directly into the narrowed yellow slit-eyes of Bull Reilly, head of the Homicide Squad. The calloused palm of his huge ham-like hand swung across my face again, tearing at the already raw flesh.

"I thought that'd bring the drunken baboon around," Bull said.

Weakly I sat up. The place went around like a crazy circus—lights, voices, men, thundering heat, all closing in on me.

Bull grabbed me by the front of my shirt, hauled me to my feet. My knees caved in and he knocked my head back with a crashing right. I went out again.

The raw stinging smell of ammonia brought me to consciousness. I heard Alton, the D. A., say, "Take it easy, Bull, we've got all we need. A confession would be superfluous."

"What confession?" I said dully.

I heard the Bull laugh.

"What confession! Ain't that a laugh. Listen, Romeo, the lady wouldn't play ball, would she? You wired her to meet you and talk things over. But Sally Day had had enough of you and your old man. She'd paid all the blackmail she had to pay. So you grabbed the carving knife and finished her."

"Sally Day—Sally Day," the name rang in my ears. "Why, she's the dame—" I muttered.

"Yeah," Bull roared. "She's the dame who murdered her husband, Handsome Frisco, just after he knocked over the Arlington Bank. She went on trial, but your old man let her escape—for a price!"

"Dad had nothing to do with that," I said. "It was a frame from start to finish. She didn't kill Frisco, and she was spirited away for fear she would talk."

"Yeah," Bull jeered, "but we found fifty grand of the missing Arlington bonds in your dad's safe deposit box! She bought your old man off with Frisco's dough. And you wanted more of it."

"A lovely story you'll have to tell your

reform friends, Toughy," Alton snapped.

I held my head in my hands. "Who drugged that whiskey?" I said. I was beginning to see the whole thing now.

"Drugged what whiskey?" Bull said. "You got drunk as a boiled owl to get up nerve enough to cut her throat."

"Get him downtown," Alton said.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What time is it? Who sent for you guys?"

"It's a quarter past four in the morning," Bull said, "and I ain't had no sleep. You ain't going to have none either, sweetheart." He started to sock me again but Alton caught his arm.

"Lay off, Bull," he said. "I told you we've got evidence." Alton smiled at me nastily. "The waiter who came to get the table saw you lying on the bedroom floor, spattered with blood. The bloody knife was a few inches away. He called the police."

TWO of Bull's boys grabbed me and started out. In the living room, I had only time for a quick look around. I saw the supper table—the champagne bottle, empty, lying on the floor—the table cloth stained, the candles guttered out. On the end table near the door was the bottle of whiskey from which I had taken *one* stiff drink. The bottle was empty. Somebody had come up after I passed out. And somebody had taken the silver fox coat. It wasn't on the chair where I had thrown it.

We went down in the service elevator. Out on the street I got two good breaths of fresh air. I had a feeling it would be the last fresh air I'd have for a long, long time. I'm not a guy to kid myself. I knew as I climbed into the radio car that I was as good as hung for the murder of Sally Day. I knew my prints would be all over the knife that killed her. I knew the water in the bathroom had been left running to keep the blood from congealing until I moved her, so the blood would spurt when I moved the body. I'd been drugged to keep me

from disposing of the corpse or fleeing.

Going downtown two things kept buzzing in my head. First, Sally was murdered only a short time before I walked into the apartment. Somebody had known just when I was due home.

I counted on my fingers. Fritz, the head waiter expected me, and Old Man Hedges. But would either one of them frame me for murder? Why? It didn't make sense.

The second thing that worried me was the silver fox coat. The cops had been plenty careful to leave everything as was. Yet the coat hadn't been on the chair where I left it. It wasn't in the foyer closet. A hotel employee would hardly have the nerve to snitch a new fur coat from a room with a corpse.

"Alton," I said, "I brought my wife a present from Louisville. A silver fox coat with a Louisville label. When you guys are through looking for clues, will you give her what's left?"

"You never had dough enough to buy any silver fox coat," Bull said. But I saw him look quickly at Alton; and Alton gave him a puzzled frown.

"Your wife doesn't want any coat from you, Jordan," Alton said. "She went home to mama a week ago, as you damn well know."

"Just the same," I said, "I'd like you guys to give her the coat. The store will remember the sale, and the elevator boy remembers bringing me up with the coat over my arm. A dozen people in the lobby must have seen it."

Bull roared, "What in hell are you trying to prove? We never saw any fox coat—" He stopped like he'd been gagged. Alton gave him a look friendly as a hungry shark.

"Sure, Jordan, we'll give your wife the coat," Alton said.

But I knew damn well he'd never seen any coat, either. And I knew he and Bull had heard about that coat from plenty of witnesses. It was the one weak spot in their case.

CHAPTER THREE

Wife No. 1

WHEN we got to the station, Alton came in and they booked me according to Hoyle. That seemed funny. They don't usually book a guy in our town until they've beaten the confession the cops want out of him. I could see Bull didn't like this setup, but Alton was playing it smart.

"See that Jordan gets a good night's rest," he said to Bull. "His reform friends will be sending their lawyer in tomorrow."

"Sure," Bull said. "For his last meal, I'll fry the chicken myself."

"Good night, Alton," I said. "Give Silky Ingham my love and kisses."

They took me down to my cell. They'd all but given me the royal suite. I appreciated the irony of it. Their case was so good they were going to give me every break. I could even see my friends and lawyers. See 'em in a nice clean sanitary cell, with every comfort.

I threw myself down on the cot and tried to figure angles. I was in Silky's hair all right; so far, he didn't dare bump me off. He had to disgrace me before the honest element. He had to have me brought to justice. Tried, convicted, sentenced to death! He'd framed me so beautifully that even his own crooked minions thought the rap was honest.

Lying there, I tried to remember about Sally Day. The State claimed she was in love with Handsome Frisco's lieutenant, Baldy Granite. She got in the car with Frisco, supposedly headed for a hide-out, shot him dead, poured gasoline on his clothes, set fire to him, and pushed the car over the cliff. To make it look good, the State claimed, she went over the cliff, too, but jumped in time to save her neck. She was shaken up but not seriously hurt. Frisco's carcass was horribly burned, but in the autopsy they found the bullet hole in

his skull. They found Sally's gun in the wreckage, and the bullet matched the hole.

Baldy Granite took it on the lam. And Sally was indicted for murder. On the advice of her physician, Dad had her moved from jail to a hospital. She escaped from the hospital. Dad never believed she killed Frisco. He thought she knew who did. He thought the escape was planned to keep her from talking.

I always thought Silky killed Frisco for the bank wad. Where did he get the bonds to plant in Dad's safe deposit box, unless he knocked Frisco off, himself?

Lying there, I wished I had someone to talk to. Someone like Joan, the second Mrs. Jordan. She was a smart girl, all right.

I fell into a nightmare, and woke up with the guard shaking me. "You've got company, Jordan."

I SAT up and rubbed my eyes. Shuffling down the corridor came Old Man Hedges. When he saw me he weaved his cane.

"I'm glad to see you behind bars!" he yelled. "That's where you belong. Taking the reformers' money and buying champagne for naked women!"

"Hedges," I said, "this is a frame! You've got to believe me!"

"Consorting with crooks, that's what you were," Hedges raved. "That woman was a fugitive from justice."

"Listen," I said, "I never saw that woman before in my life. I don't know how she got into the apartment."

"She just walked in," Hedges said, "walked right up to the clerk and says you were expecting her. That's what the clerk told the newspapers. He remembers perfectly."

"Hedges," I said, "if I were going to kill her, I wouldn't cut her throat in my own apartment. I wouldn't drug myself so I'd be found with the corpse."

The old man came closer; his eyes were

boring into mine, as if searching me out.

"Why did you kill her, Toughy?" he whispered.

"Why are you so interested?" I said, looking him back. "Maybe *you* killed her! You knew I was due home. You could have killed her, drugged the liquor, waited until I passed out, come back and planted the knife. You were in the hotel."

"No," he said. "I came into the hotel about twenty minutes after you did. Plenty of people saw me. When you shouted at me on the phone, I knew you were drunk and I walked out of the place. If you were framed, I'll fight for you; if you killed her, you can hang!"

"Thanks," I said. "I can prove I was framed." I told him about the silver fox coat.

He gnawed awhile on his mustache. "Yep," he finally said, "if the coat is gone, somebody came up after you passed out and took it. But that doesn't prove you didn't kill her."

"The telegram I was supposed to have sent her," I said, "ought to prove I didn't ask her to the apartment. Check the time it was sent. It probably was sent from here in town, and I was on the train."

"If you meant to kill her," Hedges said, "you would have had somebody in town send the telegram for an alibi." His eyes narrowed.

"Ridiculous!" I said.

"No," Hedges said, "you're in a bad spot, Toughy. That telegram was sent from the downstairs desk in your hotel. Sent by your wife."

"What!" I shouted. "Hedges, you're crazy. Eloise?" I stopped and stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Time's up," the guard said.

"Listen," I shouted, "get in touch with Eloise. She's at her mother's; make her explain!"

"Okay," Hedges said. "But until I'm sure you're innocent, I'm not going to turn a hand."

With that he shuffled off. I sank down on the bunk. Eloise! But she couldn't have wired Sally. She couldn't possibly know where Sally was hiding.

Then I had a brain wave. Maybe it wasn't Eloise who sent the wire. Hedges hadn't said which wife. He merely said—"Your wife." I'd had three.

THE guard tossed in the morning papers. My face was smeared all over the front pages, and the retouch man had done his worst. I looked like a cross between Boris Karloff and The Beast of Berlin, and the articles were in keeping. I'd killed Sally because she wouldn't pay off, or I'd killed her out of revenge for what she did to my old man. Nobody even suggested that I might be innocent.

There was a picture of Sally. I was shocked to see how beautiful she'd been. She hadn't looked so hot when I found her. There were pictures of my wives, Anna-bella, Joan and Eloise. Under Eloise's picture it said that she had collapsed and was under a doctor's care at her mother's. I read that and felt awful. That poor little kid. I hoped her old lynx of a mother would have sense enough to smuggle her out of town.

I got up and paced back and forth in my cage. I was growing uneasy. Alton had said my reform friends could see me, but nobody had come. Nobody but Hedges. That was queer. And Hedges had been plenty queer.

The cop brought me in a lunch and charged me two bucks for it. I started to get sarcastic and then piped down. The door flatfoot wasn't to blame. Bull Reilly would be taking the profit.

In the middle of the afternoon when I was getting as jumpy as a Mexican bean, the cop waltzed up to my cell and said:

"Your lawyer is here, Jordan."

My heart gave a bounce. It was darn near time somebody started building my defense.

"Swell!" I said. He ushered up a pompous little bantam in pince nez specks and a derby hat.

"Come right in Mr.—" I said. I'd seen the guy around but I couldn't remember his name.

"Puddler," he said. "Rudyard Puddler. I am sent by the Reform Interests of this city, Mr. Jordan."

"Fine," I said. "I'm dying to talk." I held out my hand. Puddler looked as if he didn't see it. He minced into the cell and dropped his brief case on my bunk. He didn't sit down and he didn't look at me.

"Listen," I said, lowering my voice, "I know Silky Ingham is behind this. If we can pin the murder on him, we can smash his whole mob."

Puddler cleared his throat. "Ahem. You can tell your story to your attorney, Mr. Jordan," he said. "I am sent by the Reform Interests." He pulled a paper out of the brief case. "Now, if you will just sign this document. It's a mere statement of fact, but naturally we want your admission in writing that you were never connected with the Reform Group in *any* way. You were merely paid to handle the publicity. Please sign."

I stared at him. "What?" I shouted.

"Under the circumstances, Mr. Jordan," Puddler said, "it's the only thing you can do. We can't afford to be associated with a cold-blooded murderer."

Talk about rats leaving a sinking ship! I get framed because I've actually got a clean-up movement started that has teeth, and those so-and-sos not only refuse to fight for me, they want written proof I had nothing to do with their organization!

"Open the gate," I yelled at the cop.

He opened up and I swung Puddler around by the collar and gave him a kick in the britches that sent him sprawling across the corridor. I heaved his brief case out after him.

"You vicious killer!" Puddler sputtered.

"Quiet," the cop said, "you're exciting

the prisoner and he's very touchy."

I leaned against the bars and the fight died out of me. The reform element had washed me up. What a laugh Silky Ingaham would get. What a sweet work-out Bull Reilly could have now. Sooner or later Plank Henry, my pal, would read the story and charge to the rescue. But what good could one guy do against a whole town?

I was leaning there racking my dismal brain, trying to think up a way to get the facts to Plank, when I heard her.

THREE was no mistaking that voice. I looked out, and sure enough down the corridor she came like a raving rocket, the cop on one side of her and her lawyer trotting along like a winded terrier on the other. Annabella!

"I'll see that Welching bum if I have to take this place apart!" Annabella was yelling.

"Now, Mrs. Jordan," her lawyer panted, "I'll handle this. Just remain calm, please."

"Calm!" Annabella yelped. "Calm, when he goes to jail owing me five weeks' alimony!"

I slunk back into my bunk.

She hauled up in front of my cage. I took a quick look at her. She looked like a million dollars; she always did. She was nearly as tall as the cop, with a fur hat perched on the side of her gold hair. She wore a fitted beige-colored coat and carried a huge mink muff.

"You!" she yelled at me. "You big cheap lug!"

"Annabella," I said, "for gosh sake, pipe down."

"Pipe down?" she said. "Don't tell me to pipe down. Here you are in the hoosegow, and where do I come in? I suppose you think you'll stay here the rest of your life while I starve!"

"Now, Mrs. Jordan," the lawyer said, "I'm sure Mr. Jordan wants to do the right thing by you. I'm sure even in his

misfortune he'll deed you a full share of his property."

"There isn't any property," I said.

"Oh, no?" Annabella yelled. "Well, I see that doll-faced midget you married driving around in a fancy convertible. And what do I drive? An old moth-eaten jalopy I can't even park on the main street. Yeah, I have to park behind the local jail, I'm so ashamed to be seen in that old mouldy green ice wagon. The fenders are rolled back like window shades; the upholstery is hanging in rags, and—"

The cop was about to die laughing; the lawyer was tut-tutting, trying to silence Annabella, but I kept looking at her, looking onto those big flashing blue eyes, and I saw something deep and sweet. She was standing back from the bars shaking that muff at me, and while her voice said one thing, her eyes were saying another.

I put my hand on the bars and the muff came nearer. The lawyer ducked back and tugged at the cop's sleeve. The cop leaned down to hear what he was whispering, turned his back and pointed up the hall. Annabella, still hooting like a locomotive, pushed the end of the muff through the bars.

I reached in and my fingers closed over the handle of an automatic. It took me just one second to draw the gun out and jam it under the blanket on the bunk.

"You got yourself into this and you'll have to *get yourself out*," Annabella was saying. "Nobody is going to help a bum like you!"

"Annabella," I said, "I'll divide everything between you and Eloise; I give you my word."

"You had better give me that convertible," Annabella said. "I haven't any use for that eighteen-sixty model that I can't park on a decent street."

"Now, Mrs. Jordan," the lawyer said, "Mr. Jordan has shown his willingness to cooperate. That's all we wanted. I'll get the papers ready for your signature, Mr.

Jordan, if you'll wait just a moment."

He pulled Annabella's arm, and, with a snoot at me, she turned and followed him down the hall.

The cop looked after them. "You don't have much luck with your wives, Jordan," he said.

"No," I said. "But if I had it to do over, I'd marry that girl again!"

The cop looked like he thought I was nuts. "Well," he said, "she might have offered you that mouthpiece."

"I don't need him," I said. I was thinking fast. Thinking of what Annabella had said. *You'll have to get yourself out. An old green car parked behind the jail.* What a girl!

CHAPTER FOUR

Wife No. 2

I WALKED over to the bars. "Hey, buddy," I said to the cop. "Got a cigarette? Give me just a drag."

"It's against rules," the cop said. He looked up and down the hall and then he stepped over close to the door.

I hated to do it; I hated it because he was a nice guy, but as he cupped his hands to light the cigarette, I stuck one hand through the bars, grabbed his neck and slammed the butt of the gun down on his head. He gave a long sigh and started sliding to the floor. I hung on to him and reached for the keys. It wasn't hard to unlock the cell door and drag the copper in with me. I took off his coat and heaved him up onto the bunk. I tied his hands with my necktie and improvised a gag with two handkerchiefs, and then I covered him over with the blanket.

I got into his coat and took his hat, keys and gun. Quietly, I let myself into the corridor. I slid toward the back. I knew there was a flight of stairs going up, another door, a hall, and a rear exit at the end of the hall. I had to make that exit.

In the end cell, a big prisoner was play-

ing solitaire with a pack of dirty cards. He didn't even look up as I glided by. I went upstairs, keeping flat to the wall. I could hear voices just beyond the door, then a roar of laughter. Bull Reilly.

I took a grip on the gun. If that flatfoot tried to stop me, I'd let him have it. It would be worth hanging for, pumping lead into Reilly.

On the top step I stopped and listened. I heard a door slam, then quiet. Cautiously, I unlocked the heavy door and opened it a crack. The hall was clear. Still holding the gun ready for action, I gumshoed down the hall and pulled open the outside door, pulled it open and froze.

The door gave onto a little platform with a few steps leading down into the parking lot; and just below the platform, standing with his back to me, was Silky Ingham.

It was twilight. The street lights were just winking on, but there was no mistaking the dapper Silky Ingham. He wore a light gray suit and a snap brim hat. As always, he carried a cane and gloves. He was talking to one of his boys, a great bruiser known as Ape Martin. I knew it was a matter of seconds before he came up the steps and into the brightly lighted jail. I took a quick look behind me. The hall was still empty, but from a closed door on the right I heard Bull get up from his desk, still laughing.

Ingham must have heard him, too. He glanced my way. It was too late now. I pulled the cop's cap down over my eyes, squared my shoulders, dropped the gun into my hip pocket and walked out and down the steps. Silky and the Ape stopped talking and watched me. Swiftly I saluted and went on. Silky gave me a nod and walked into the jail, but Ape stood watching me.

My eyes raked the grounds for a dilapidated green car.. There were about ten cars. I got behind a gray coupe fast. I didn't like the Ape standing there following me with his eyes. My pants were dark, but they weren't cut like a copper's and I wasn't

wearing a copper's black and solid shoes.

"Hey, flatfoot!" It was the Ape. He was coming toward me. I half turned and reached for my rod.

"Officer!"

I looked up quickly. Two cars away, a woman, a redhead woman, was sitting in an old green car.

"Officer, will you help me start my car?"

"Sure, lady!" I said.

The Ape must have thought I was out to win the courtesy award. I was on the running board of that car in two seconds flat. The gal slid over and I went under the wheel. The engine was already purring. I let out the clutch and wheeled for the street. The last I saw, the Ape was standing looking after us, scratching his head.

I hoped and prayed he hadn't recognized the red-headed woman. I nearly fainted when I saw her myself. It was Joan, ex number two—the second Mrs. Jordan.

GO DOWN three blocks and turn up the Swartz alley," she whispered, her breath wonderfully sweet against my cheek. "My car is there. There'll be an alarm out for this one."

I grinned and patted her knee. She always had had brains under that red thatch. We swung into the alley and I pulled up behind a small black roadster.

"Get your hat and coat out of the back," Joan said. "You're my dear old auntie and I'm taking you for a little ride."

"Huh?" I said. Then I picked up the darnedest looking straw hat with a bunch of mildewed pansies sticking up in front. Sewed around the brim, in prim scallops, was a border of false white hair.

"Put it on," Joan said, "and get into the coat, quick. Keep the collar turned up around your jaw, and stick those piledriver hands in the muff."

I got into the rig fast, feeling sillier than I ever felt in my life. Joan grabbed the cop's stuff and jammed it down into a barrel of trash. Then she hopped under the

wheel and started racing the motor.

"Get in," she urged. "If they catch you now, you'll never live to go to trial!"

"Would you care, sweetheart?" I said, flopping in beside her.

"Sure," she said. "Who'll abuse me when you're gone?"

She drove into the street and headed for the city limits, showing a respect for traffic signals that was most unlike her.

"You've played cops and robbers before, baby," I said.

"Yeah," she said, "and this is our time to hide. I know a lovely place across the state line."

"Listen," I said, "how come you and Annabella are risking your necks for me?"

"Darling," she said, "we couldn't stand the thought of a louse like you dying a hero on the gallows."

"What do you mean, hero?" I said.

She quit kidding. "Toughy," she said, "we know why you were taking that phony rap. We know who you were protecting."

I said, "What are you talking about?"

"Eloise," she said. "Eloise killed Sally Day."

I nearly fell out of the car. I knew Joan didn't care too much for little Eloise, but Joan had sense. Her saying a thing like that was preposterous.

"Joan," I said, "you're nuts! Why in hell would Eloise kill Sally Day?"

She looked at me sharply. "You really don't know, do you? Well, kiss your ego good-by, dear. It's in for an awful beating." She paused.

"Eloise killed Sally Day because she wants to marry Silky Ingham—and she knew she'd never get him while Sally was alive. Silky Ingham has been in love with Sally for years. You wouldn't understand, dear, but some guys love just one woman for ever and ever. That was the way it was with Silky. He killed Handsome Frisco because he wanted Sally. He engineered her escape and has been hiding her ever since. It was a beautiful romance until Baby

Eloise came to Silky's place to check hats and fell in love with Silky."

I exploded. "Eloise despises Silky!"

"Sure," Joan said, "because Silky won't give her any time. But Eloise wants to marry Silky more than she wants anything else in this world. You ought to know, sucker, how she loves nice things."

"Joan," I said, "you've got brain fever. Are you seriously saying you think Eloise killed Sally and deliberately framed me?"

"She didn't mean to frame you," Joan said. "She had no idea you were coming home. She wired Sally. Sally came to the party, and Eloise drugged her and killed her. Then you arrived. After you passed out, Eloise must have seen the light. She could plant the knife with you and keep any suspicion from herself. She didn't dare let Ingham find out that she killed Sally."

I WANTED to throw back my head and roar. I wanted to show Joan what a crazy fool I thought she was, but the laugh stuck in my throat. I began to remember little things. Eloise talked a lot about Silky. She was always wanting to go to his joints. She said it was to show off 'cause she wasn't working for him any more. And Hedges had said the telegram was sent by my wife from the hotel. Eloise was the only wife of mine Hedges had met; she was the only wife the hotel employees knew.

"Joan," I said, "I'll speak slowly and distinctly so you can get this. For some reason Silky wanted to get rid of Sally. He also wanted to get me. See, two birds with one stone. That's what happened."

Joan looked at me. "Toughy," she said, "don't expose your weak wits to the night air. If Silky had wanted to frame you, he would have done it in fool-proof fashion. This frame was full of holes. Suppose you and Plank Henry had come back and gone upstairs together. You'd have had an airtight alibi. Suppose you had found the body immediately, before you took a drink, and had phoned the cops. No, you walked in on

a party, *unexpectedly*, and got yourself elected goat."

We were out on the highway and Joan was kicking the car along at a terrific clip. Watching her set face in the dusk, I knew she believed what she was saying. And I knew she was wrong. Eloise might have had a yen for Silky; his swagger and his dough might have impressed her, but Eloise hadn't killed Sally. She couldn't have! There are some things you know with your heart, and I knew that Eloise never committed that ghastly murder.

I wasn't going to quarrel with Joan about it. After all, Joan was a swell girl and I'd been an awful heel.

"So you figure Eloise just married me 'cause she was tired of working," I said.

"I figure," Joan said, "that Eloise married you because Ingham was interested in your activities. I figure she acquainted him with every move you made. . . . *Look out!*"

Joan jammed on the brake. Across the road, directly in front of us, was a police car.

The cops stepped into the road and signaled with a flash. Joan drew up and leaned out smiling. One cop stepped over to her side of the car and my heart nearly stopped beating.

Joan's red hair! If the Ape had reported seeing us together . . .

"What's up, officer?" Joan asked, all eager. "Smugglers?"

The cop flashed his light directly in my face. I tried to shrink under the pansies on my hat.

"Let's see your driver's license," the cop said.

He still kept the light on me. I didn't dare move a muscle. Driver's license! Good Lord, Mrs. Joan Jordan would be the name on the license. . . .

"Here it is." Joan pulled the license out of her bag with a lovely smile. The cop held it under the light.

"Okay, Mrs. Wilson," he said, "drive on."

"Bye-bye," Joan said, and we rolled away.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wife No. 3

I SHOULD have jumped for joy, getting out of a spot like that. But I didn't feel happy. "Mrs. Wilson!" I said. "So you married again!"

"No," she said. "I had an experience in matrimony that cured me for all time! I've been visiting Mrs. Wilson. I borrowed her license."

"Oh!" I said, and somehow I felt a lot better.

The moon came up and I moved over toward Joan. It was a great night, and rolling along with her I almost forgot to worry.

It was after midnight when we pulled across the state border. We went through a couple of small villages and then headed for the first big town.

"It's safer to be in a big place," Joan said. "You can stay quiet for a few weeks and then make for New York, or South America, or Timbuktoo."

"How about you?" I asked. "They'll be sure to question you. Have you framed an alibi for tonight?"

"Funny," Joan laughed, "I never thought of that."

"Then you're not going back," I said. "Ape knows the woman in the car had red hair. If Bull Reilly thought you had anything to do with this, he'd—" I shivered and put an arm around Joan.

"Something tells me," Joan said, pushing me off, "that I'd be safer with Bull Reilly than with you, dear."

We drove into town and down a side street that had a row of little houses all exactly like each other.

"You're home," Joan said, stopping in the driveway just east of one cottage. "You're Mrs. Wilson's brother, and you're staying here while she's on a trip."

Joan got out and led the way into the house. She switched on the lamp and I took a look around the living room, which was snug enough, with a china cat, tatted chair backs, and family photographs on an upright piano. I got the impression that Mrs. Wilson was neither young or modern, though she did have a radio. I switched the radio on and then dumped my masquerade.

"Who is Mrs. Wilson?" I asked.

"My aunt," Joan said. "So now you're my uncle and I can bring you grub without shocking anybody who asks."

"You could even spend the night," I said, innocently. She stopped dead.

"Listen!" She pointed to the radio. A news broadcast was emerging from a layer of static.

"All motorists beware. Jordan is armed and desperate. It is believed he is disguised as a police officer. Mrs. Eloise Jordan, his wife, has been taken into custody. Police are convinced she was an accomplice. It has been established beyond doubt that she sent the telegram to Miss Day. The police expect Mrs. Jordan to make a complete confession within a few hours."

ELOISE! Eloise in the hands of Bull Reilly and Alton. The sweat stood out on my brow; the palms of my hands were cold and wet. I rubbed them on my pants, then stopped, feeling a lump in my pocket. I still had the jail keys.

Without a word, I dashed for the door. Joan's car was in the drive.

"Toughy," Joan said, "where are you going? Are you mad? It's just a trap, Toughy; a trap to get you back! They won't hurt her!"

"Won't they?" I said. I flung through the door, Joan after me. She swung in front of me, hanging on to my lapels.

"Toughy, listen to me! They know you have the keys you took from the guard. They know you're enough of a damn fool to do just what you're doing. They're waiting there for you, I tell you!"

"I'm not a damn fool," I said. "I'm not yellow enough to let Eloise take the rap, either. I've got to get her out of there, Joan. She didn't kill Sally!"

Joan slid her arms around my neck; I could feel her hot tears on my cheek.

"Toughy," she whispered, "stay here with me. It's the only favor I ever asked of you. You loved me once, Toughy. I'd let you go if it was right, but it's not. She's a cheap little fool; she's not worth your life, Toughy. Stay, Toughy, oh please stay!"

I couldn't stay. I kept seeing that baby face, the blue eyes wide with terror, the pale curls glistening under the beating white light, while Bull and Alton worked on her. I didn't know why Eloise had wired Sally, but I knew she was no killer. I had to save her.

I shook Joan loose and made for the car. I jumped into the front seat. The car keys were gone. I raced back to Joan.

"The keys," I said. "Give me the keys to the car."

"Sure," Joan said quietly. "But all the roads are watched. You'll never get through."

I dashed into the house; the keys were on the table. I rushed out to the car. I stopped a second and looked around for Joan. I didn't see her.

"Joan," I called softly.

She didn't answer. I got into the car and headed back.

I had to go back, but I still heard Joan's voice. *You loved me once, Toughy.* And I knew then that I had always loved her. It struck me like a lead pipe. She'd never believe that now. She risked her own life to help me, and she thought I was tossing her away for Eloise.

But even Joan must know that her plan to help me escape wouldn't work. I never could crawl off to safety. I had a score to settle with Silky Ingham—and I was going to settle it tonight!

I raced back, trying to scheme things out as I drove. I didn't dare tackle a main

highway, so I kept to the back roads. I crossed the state border on an old cow path I hadn't driven on in years and kept winding nearer. But how was I going to get back into town? All the roads were watched, and the radio was broadcasting my description every fifteen minutes. Not only the cops, but the whole countryside was looking for me.

Crossing the old bridge, I had a brain wave. I suddenly remembered the tracks. There was no road, but for five miles out of town there were rows and rows of railroad tracks.

It was the damndest drive I ever took. I tried to straddle the rails, keeping on the cinder-bedded ties. I turned my lights out so no railroad dick would stop me coming, and literally felt my way along. Every minute I expected a tire to blow or a wheel to pull off. I had to cross and re-cross the tracks, dodging around freight cars on sidings. Somebody yelled from a work train and I put on speed. Now I could see the street lights in town. I couldn't stay on the tracks; I was getting too near the yards. With a prayer that the car would take it, I cut across the tracks, bumping crazily. Throwing her into first, we climbed up the embankment and pulled out onto the street.

I WANTED to stop. My arms were practically pulled out of their sockets, but I was afraid to waste a minute. God knew what Bull Reilly would be doing to Eloise. Torturing a helpless girl would be his idea of swell fun.

I pushed on. I planned to drive right by the jail and get the lay of the land, then park on a side street and creep through the parking lot and in the back door. Bull might have Eloise in his office off the corridor. Or, he might have her upstairs. My only chance was to slide in and start shooting before the Bull could draw.

When I turned into the street before the jail, I slowed down. The place was lighted

up like a new saloon. The hunt for Toughy Jordan was on in earnest!

A prowler car raced by me, and then I saw parked directly in front of the building Silky Ingham's long, gleaming, cream-colored car. The headlights were on and the engine was running. I couldn't see the guy behind the wheel very well, but he was wearing a chauffeur's cap. As I watched, the jail doors swung open and Silky came out, followed by the Ape. Hanging onto Silky's arm was a girl, a small girl with pale blonde hair!

Eloise! And she was wearing a silver fox coat!

The chauffeur bounced out and opened the door. I recognized him then, all right. Silky's Jap, one of the nastiest torpedoes in the country.

Silky helped Eloise into the car and got in himself. Ape swung up beside the Jap and the car flashed off down the avenue.

I followed, staying as close as I could without broadcasting that I was on their tail. They zoomed through stop-lights and turned west, heading for the suburban residential district. They shot by the big houses of our ultra-solvent citizens and out into a modest district. Where was Silky going? Why was he taking Eloise? And where in hell did Eloise get the silver fox coat?

The car skidded into a branch street that I knew well and slowed down. I pulled into the shadows of a big elm and switched off my lights. The cream-colored car stopped. I held my breath; I couldn't believe it. The car had stopped just across from Old Man Hedges' bungalow! As I watched, I saw Silky and Eloise get out and cross the street, the Ape trundling behind. They went up Hedges' walk and on to his front porch.

I cursed the Jap, still posted at the car. I couldn't follow without arousing his suspicions. Quietly, I slipped from under the wheel and into the shadows. My best bet was to duck down the block and come up

on Hedges' cottage from the rear—fast.

As I crossed under the street light, I hoped the Jap was watching the house. I tried to walk nonchalantly, like a simple citizen heading home. I went down a few doors, up a driveway, climbed a fence, and started cutting across backyards toward Hedges' cottage. It was pitch dark and I stumbled along as fast as I could. Once I nearly hung myself on a clothesline, and another time I splashed into a birdbath, tripped and fell headlong.

I got up and counted the houses; the next one was Hedges', I was sure of that. The back of the house was dark. Softly I felt my way along. I found the back steps and crept up on the back porch. Gently I tried the door and swore. The door was locked.

I FELT my way back down the steps and started around the side of the house. The window shades were drawn and only a sliver of light filtered across the grass. The cottage was white and I knew I must loom big and black against it. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled. Just under the window I stopped. I could hear voices. Silky laughed, and it wasn't a pretty laugh.

"You'll talk, all right!" Silky said. "We know you had been meeting Sally. She was the leak."

"I never saw her!" Old Man Hedges' voice was high with panic.

"No?" Silky said. "All right, Ape, smash his nose."

"No, Silky, no!" It was Eloise. "Mr. Hedges," her voice was pleading, "you've got to confess. I saw you with her. Toughy introduced you to her, didn't he? He was romancing her to get her to help the reformer. I know. Tell Silky the truth!"

But the Ape didn't give Hedges a chance to answer. The old man let out a scream that turned my vertebrae to ice cubes. I grabbed my gun and swung back to smash the window and tear away the shade. I

(Continued on page 102)

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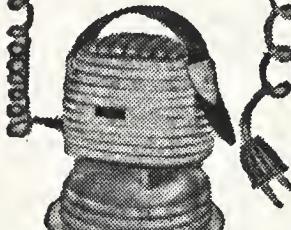
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Tiah Devitt

(Continued from page 100)

didn't dare shoot blind; I might kill Eloise or Hedges.

As I raised my arm to strike, a white pain streaked through my shoulder; the gun dropped from my numb hand. I could feel the cold steel of the knife blade deep in my flesh.

I turned to wrench the knife out just as the Jap chauffeur sprang. I ducked and he crashed into the house. I swung on to my knees and slammed my good left into his face. He cursed and kicked out his heel, driving into my chest with a crushing force. I went backwards as he came up. A gun barked through the window, two deafening shots. The Jap gasped once, shivered and fell forward on top of me, the blood from his blasted brains rushing over me. The Ape, aiming for me when I was over the chauffeur, had got him.

I heard Silky curse and I tried to roll out from under the corpse of his knife-throwing killer. Then the Ape came through the window; I saw the great massive bulk of him and tried frantically to roll clear, but it was too late.

I came to lying on the floor. The pain from my shoulder was tearing up and down my arm, it hurt to breathe. I thought the Jap must have kicked in my lungs; I could feel the blood ooze stickily inside my clothes. I lay waiting for the waves of weakness to pass. Then I opened my eyes.

The first thing I saw was Eloise, sitting stiff as a doll, her wide-open eyes fixed on me in a kind of fascinated horror. She sat so stiff at first that I thought she was dead. Then I saw her fingers ripping at her wad of handkerchief. When I looked at her she didn't move or smile.

Silky was lounging behind her chair, insolently at ease, but the automatic in his hand was leveled at my head. Painfully, I sat up. It was easier to breathe, but I felt as weak as a cat. I managed to prop my

(Continued on page 104)



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Tiah Devitt

(Continued from page 102)

good shoulder against the wall—and then I saw Old Man Hedges.

CHAPTER SIX

The Ghost of Handsome Frisco

HE WAS lashed in a chair. His eyes were open, and I knew by his expression that he was still conscious. His nose was smashed back against his face, both nostrils streaming blood until it shrouded the whole lower part of his face. Blood ran from his ears too, dripping on his shoulders, and I knew there were many marks on him I couldn't see.

For one insane instant, I thought of rushing Silky, of beating the life out of him with my one good hand. Then I saw he'd shoot me before I could get on my feet. All I could do was wait for a chance, half a chance, and I couldn't wait long. Old Man Hedges wouldn't last more than a few minutes, with the life blood running out of him, and neither Silky nor Eloise moved a muscle to save him.

"Well, Mr. Jordan, this is a pleasure," Silky said.

He moved toward me, his pale blue-white eyes shining with an unholy light. It was all I could do to hold still.

"You went after the only woman in the world you shouldn't have," he said, his voice a glitter of steel. "I killed her, Jordan, and I'll kill you—but not for hours—not for days. Even the Ape couldn't stand watching what I'll do to you!" He laughed.

I realized then that the Ape was gone. Eloise didn't move.

"I knew you killed Sally, Silky, I said quietly. "You killed her and framed me. I had never seen Sally Day until the night I found her corpse. She was tricked into coming to my apartment, Silky. She never saw me in her life."

"You're lying!" Silky lashed out with

The Merry Wives of Murder

his foot, kicking me in the teeth. I spit blood onto the carpet.

"It won't do you any good to lie," Eloise said. "You were cheating on me, Toughy. I saw her come out of the apartment with my own eyes. You pretended you'd gone to Kentucky just so I'd go to Mama and you could carry on with her! You were pumping her about Silky, things to help the Reform Movement. Well, I fixed your wagon, brother."

"You certainly did," I said. And I looked at Eloise. For the first time, I saw what a cheap nasty little thing she was. To soothe her own vanity, to make up for a fancied wrong, she'd send me to the morgue. Lovely girl!

She must have seen the contempt in my eyes, for she flared up:

"I sent that wire to Sally Day," she cried. "I signed your name, and she came. Came, expecting to find you! Well, she found me, and was she surprised!" Eloise laughed, a high hysterical laugh. "But I told her you'd be in any minute, and I offered her a drink."

My brain clicked. "A drink," I shouted. "You drugged that whiskey!"

"Silky wouldn't believe me," Eloise said. "He wouldn't believe my story about you and Sally, so I proved it. I drugged her so she wouldn't get suspicious and leave, so Silky could find her in the apartment, see her there with his own eyes! When she passed out, I phoned for Silky."

Silky's face worked.

"You loved her, Silky, and you killed her, but she was innocent," I taunted him. "She never came to see me."

"You're lying," he yelled. "I found her on your bed, naked. I dumped her into the tub. I thought she was drunk and I was going to bring her around under a cold shower. And then the table was brought up with the lovely little supper you had planned—champagne for two, white orchids, her favorite flower . . ."

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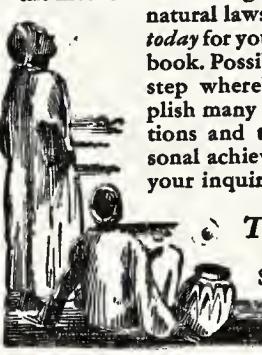
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Tiah Devitt

I STARED at him. "Where were you, Silky, when I came in?" I said.

"On the fire escape," Silky said, "waiting to kill you. When you passed out, I thought of a better death for you—a nice legal hanging! The murder would wash you up with the reform element. All the dope Sally had spilled about my enterprises would be so much eye wash. But now, Jordan—"

He stepped toward me, then stopped.

From behind his ghastly mask of blood, Old Man Hedges was laughing, laughing in a crazy confident cackle.

"You killed the only thing you ever loved, Silky," Hedges said. "She hated you! She was squealing on you, but she didn't give a damn about Jordan. You know who she came to see, Silky! You know, and it's driving you mad!"

At the taunt, Silky whirled on the old man, his arm raised to club that mocking mask of horror.

"You—!" Silky whirled on the old man, his arm raised to club that mocking mask of horror.

"You—!" Silky choked in fury, then rushed Hedges.

It was my chance, my half chance: I dived for Silky's legs. Silky swung sideward and brought the revolver crashing down toward my head. I rolled, taking the vicious blow on my shoulder. From the window, in quick succession, came two shots. Silky stood as if transfixed. Then, like a man in a slow motion picture, his arms dropped to his sides; with crazy slowness he half wheeled and pitched forward. He didn't move.

I grabbed for Silky's gun, crawled behind his body, and covered the window. The Ape's aim was rotten tonight, but I knew he'd keep on trying to get me.

"Eloise," I barked, "telephone for a doctor. Untie Hedges. Quick!"

"Eloise," the voice below the window said, "don't move or I'll blast you!"

The Merry Wives of Murder

I stared in amazement. It was a woman's voice. And then through the window came a red head and slim shoulders.

"Joan!" I shouted.

There was an automatic in her hand. Her dress was torn, the knees were out of her stockings, and both of her eyes were blackened.

"Hello, Toughy," she said. "It was rough coming over those tracks. On the way home, I'll drive and you hide in the rumble seat. Please sit on Mr. Ingham while I phone the State Troopers."

Silky was moaning in awful pain. Joan finished phoning and helped me truss him up. We weren't taking any chances.

"I saw the Ape carrying off the Jap," Joan said. "Keep your gun steady."

We got Hedges to the couch and put cold compresses on his horribly slashed face.

Old Man Hedges opened his eyes. "Sally's diary, with all the dope on Ingham's mob, is in my safe deposit box," he whispered. He gave us the name of the bank.

"Why did Sally give you the diary?" I asked. I knew he didn't have long to live and I had to know the truth.

Hedges smiled. "It's a long story," he said, "and I haven't got much time."

"You're going to be all right," Joan said. "The doctor is coming." But we both crouched low to hear the story the old man whispered.

"
SALLY DAY," he said, "was a very beautiful and a very clever woman. Two men wanted her: Silky Ingham and Handsome Frisco. She loved Frisco and she married him. Silky never got over that."

Silky, lying bound on the floor, groaned faintly.

"Sally and Frisco were like a lot of crooks," Hedges said. "They always meant to do just one more job and go straight. The Arlington bank was to be their last



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stick-up. They worked out that job to the last minute detail; it was beautifully timed and perfectly executed. They got away with a million dollars worth of bonds. But immediately afterward, they discovered that Baldy Granite, one of their most trusted men, had sold out to Silky Ingham. Silky planned to turn Frisco in to the cops and keep Sally and the million dollars.

"Sally was too smart for him. With Frisco, she worked out a plan. They took Baldy Granite for a ride, shot him, poured gasoline on his clothes and set fire to him, then sent him over the cliff in the car. They got rid of Baldy, and they assured Frisco's freedom, by planting the scene with Frisco's effects to make the world believe that the dead man was Handsome Frisco. Sally was to join Frisco in their hideout, after the thing blew over."

Hedges drew a deep breath. "But the thing didn't blow over," he continued. "Sally was arrested and tried for murder. Silky Ingham, believing Frisco dead, still wanted the money and the woman. He had Sally spirited away from the hospital to a secret hideout. She gave him some of the bonds; she had to. But she never told him that Handsome Frisco was still alive."

I broke in. "And Silky framed Dad with those bonds?"

"It's all in Sally's diary," Hedges said. "Your dad had been in Silky's hair; he refused to go crooked, so Silky fixed him."

"What about Handsome Frisco?" Joan broke in.

"There wasn't much he could do," Hedges said. "Silky had a powerful mob. Frisco was alone. He simply waited—watched and waited. One day he saw Sally on the street. They recognized each other, but they had to be cautious. Silky would have killed Frisco instantly, if he'd known he was still alive. Frisco and Sally met secretly. It was her idea that they get Silky legally."

I whistled.

The Merry Wives of Murder

"I'm sorry, Toughy," Hedges said, "that I got you into a jam. I knew your wife was with her mother. I thought you were at Louisville, and your apartment was an ideal place for Sally and Frisco to meet."

"Oh!" Eloise blinked. "Then it wasn't Toughy that Sally came to see!"

"No," Hedges said. "When you signed his name to that telegram, she thought it was a message from Frisco wanting to meet her in Jordan's apartment. She came—to her death!"

His eyes closed.

"Hedges," I said, "Hedges, the doctor is coming; you're going to be all right."

HE TRIED to smile. "No, Toughy," he said. "At last Sally and I are going straight. You'll find the bonds in the safe deposit box with her diary."

"Why," Eloise gasped, "why, he—Old Man Hedges is Handsome Frisco!"

"Sure," Joan said. "Why do you think Silky mutilated him? He recognized him when he walked in this door."

"But," Eloise gulped, "is Hedges wearing a wig?"

"No," Joan said. "Don't you remember? Handsome Frisco was called 'Handsome' because of his flashing black eyes and his prematurely white hair. He merely let his hair grow into that ill-kept mane and grew a drooping mustache. Nobody would connect a shoddy old man in ill-fitting clothes with the dashing Frisco."

"And nobody is going to connect them now," I said. "Old Man Hedges cleaned up this city! He's going to get the credit!" I looked down; the old man grinned up at me and then his eyes closed, and I knew his agony was over.

Joan shook my sleeve. "Listen," she said, "and you too, Eloise. Silky Ingham killed Old Man Hedges to keep from being exposed. He confessed to the murder of Sally Day—you're a witness, Eloise, and you'd better be a good one!"

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Tiah Devitt

"Yes," Eloise quavered, backing away from Joan's scathing look toward the silver fox coat. "Toughy—I'm—I'm sorry," she bleated.

"Eloise!" I shouted, "where did you get that coat?"

"Why, why," she said, "Mr. Ingham gave it to Mama."

"What?" I demanded.

"Mama missed me that night," Eloise said. "She was afraid I'd forgiven you and she came to the hotel to get me. She opened the door and she saw the table for two and—and Mr. Ingham. She thought I was having a little supper with him and that he was mad 'cause she'd busted in. She saw the coat on the chair and she said, 'Ain't that a pretty coat! Did you get this for my little girl, Mr. Ingham? How sweet!' And he glared at her and said, 'Take the coat and scram! If you ever tell anybody you saw me here, I'll wring your scrawny neck,' So Mama took the coat and scammed."

I was turning purple. "You mean to tell me," I yelled, "that your simpering hyena of a mother saw Silky Ingham in the apartment the night of the murder and let me be arrested and never came forward? What a mother-in-law!"

"What do you mean, mother-in-law?" Joan said. "Toughy, that Mexican divorce of mine wasn't worth the paper it was written on. We're still married."

"What?" Eloise squealed.

"Legally," Joan said, "you're just what you are morally. I'm too much of a lady to use the word. Give me that silver fox coat."

"But," Eloise protested, "it's mine! It's mine!"

"Oh no," Joan said. "The coat is mine and the convertible is Annabella's." Her eyes, shining and wet, took the sting from her next words. "As for Toughy, he's mine, too. . . . I can't trust anybody else to look after the big, dame-chasing dope!"

I like redheads. . . .

• • •

John Bender

(Continued from page 72)

"Holy mackerel!" Willie says. "Mac— you hear that?"

"Willie," squeals Helen, "you are wonderful!"

"That money should come in handy to a pair of newly weds, eh?" the lieutenant observes.

"And to some oldy weds, too!" I finally get my voice back. Half of twenty thousand bucks! "With this kind of dough I think that I am able to pay off two ex-wives of mine, permanent!"

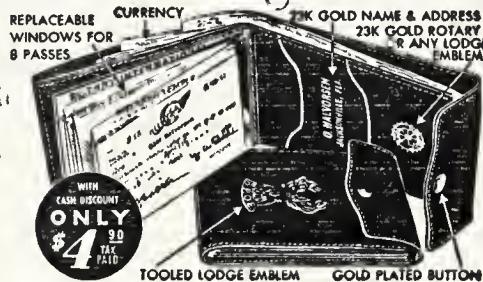
The lieutenant takes us downtown to clean up the case, and on the ride he keeps looking at me queer. It develops that he is a bachelor and that he is quite impressed by the number of my wives.

It figures that he wants me to give him some advice, but I am not in the mood for talking. Despite all that cash I am in line for, I am a little blue, too; sad, sort of, because I am thinking of that little sweetmeat who takes over Willie's apartment and how it is such a pity that she is going to have to spend her best years in the brig.

But mostly I am sorry about the way I have to treat her, tossing her at the gunman like I do. As far as I can remember, it is the first time I ever throw away a redhead in my life.

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Rufus Bakalor

(Continued from page 82)

piano, and, on it, a congestion of photographs. And her idea of an evening of fun was to play dominoes and, afterwards, look through the stereoscope.

"Hmmm. Here's a real pretty scene of Rio de Janeiro," Milo would say whenever his favorite picture came up. "That's one place I'd sure like to visit."

"Maybe you will some day, dearie," Cora would always reply. "You're just like them other husbands of mine. Ed, Charley, and Fred. Talk, talk, talk. Hand me the stereo."

At times, Milo tried manfully to suggest that a note of modernity might be interjected into the household. "I see they got a new way of preserving food now," he once hinted. "They freeze them. Maybe we ought to try some strawberries or something."

"Ha!" Cora said. "Freeze them, indeed! The old ways are still the best ways, dearie."

According to Milo's schedule, the time for the elimination of Cora had come and gone. It was that pesky love. He thought that perhaps he would put it off just one more time; but he saw the folly of delay in the matter. One more delay would lead to another and then another, and then there would be no Rio. With a great effort, he reasoned himself into getting it over with on the following Tuesday and it was with some pride in his determination that he went to the basement to put his instruments in order.

On the following Tuesday, however, Milo was in no position to travel anywhere, except, possibly, as a commodity. With a competent and experienced hand, Cora had cremated him in the furnace; and the crock that contained his small, tell-tale remains had joined those of Ed, Charley, and Fred on a remote shelf in Cora's fruit cellar. It was, like the others, labeled in an old-fashioned hand: *Pickled Ash.*

• • •

For Old Crime's Sake

(Continued from page 55)

Hyson stood in the living room and looked at him. "Not a damn thing. But I've dug up the woman in the grocery store and she swears she remembers Hempton. So you won't hang. That's for sure. For the rest of it . . . Who knows? It depends on the judge . . . and the jury . . . how I go with them . . . a hundred different things that no one can bet on. It's your pitch, Tommy. What do you want to do?"

Tommy Perrin thought a moment and remembered a couple of days ago, feeling free and breathing in the cold clean air. He told Hyson to go ahead and call in the police.

Divorce is a sharp tearing and death cuts someone from our minds in hot, surprised pain. The flesh of our mind takes time to heal. But it does heal. He listened to Joe Hyson talking on the phone in the hallway, thinking to himself, "Nice going, nice going, Tommy Perrin, nice going. • • •

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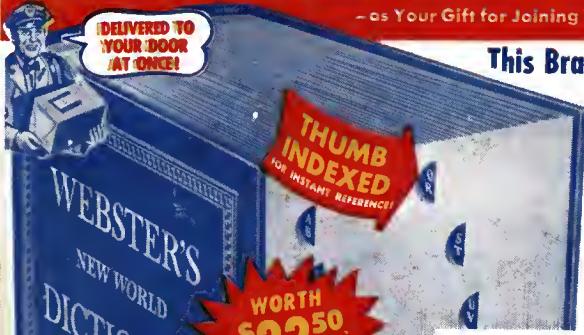
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